

A romantic couple is shown in a lush park setting. The woman, with long red hair, is wearing a white sleeveless dress and is being embraced from behind by a man in a light blue shirt and dark trousers. They are looking at each other and about to kiss. The background features large trees with green and yellowing leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The overall mood is romantic and serene.

DIANA

New York Times and *USA TODAY* Bestselling Author

PALMER

TO HAVE
AND TO HOLD

Are her unknown boss and the sexy mystery man next door one and the same? Find out in New York Times bestselling author Diana Palmer's acclaimed story, TO HAVE AND TO HOLD!

Who *is* Cal Forrest? wonders shy Madeline Blainn. Her new neighbor is undeniably gorgeous. He's also older and worldlier, but nevertheless, Maddy finds herself drawn to the man. Something about him seems oddly familiar, but she's had no time for a personal life since her fiancé passed away days before their wedding. Maddy does her best to stop thinking about the irresistible Cal. But as the secrets between them grow, so does the attraction. Can they confess their hidden desires in time for true love to blossom?

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

Just who was Cal Forrest? Shy Madeline Blainn's new neighbor was as mysterious as he was mesmerizing. First, he'd turned her simple world topsy-turvy—and then her heart. Cal's passionate kisses made falling in love easy—but just *who* was she really falling for?

Dear Reader:

Back by popular demand! Diana Palmer has long been a favorite of Silhouette readers, and it is with great pleasure that we bring back these impossible-to-find classics.

After the Music, Dream's End, Bound by a Promise, Passion Flower, To Have and to Hold and *The Cowboy and the Lady* are some of the first books Diana Palmer ever wrote, and we've been inundated by your many requests for these stories. All of us at Silhouette Books are thrilled to put together books four, five and six of Diana Palmer Duets—each volume holds two full novels.

Earlier this year we published the first three volumes of Diana Palmer Duets, containing *Sweet Enemy, Love on Trial, Storm Over the Lake, To Love and Cherish, If Winter Comes* and *Now and Forever*, to universal acclaim and sell-out crowds. Don't miss this chance of a lifetime to add to your collection.

The twelve novels contained in the six “Duets” show all the humor, intensity, emotion and special innocence that have made Diana Palmer such a beloved name at Silhouette Books. I’d like to say to Diana’s present, past and future fans—sit back, relax and enjoy!

Best wishes,

Isabel Swift
Editorial Manager

A Note from Diana Palmer

Dear Readers:

This book contains *To Have and to Hold*—my third published book—and *The Cowboy and the Lady*, my first published Silhouette Desire.

To Have and to Hold was strictly for fun. I loved that big black dog of Cal Forrest's, especially when he ate Madeline's steak and pushed her down in the stream behind the house. He was actually based on my own dog, Mingo, a Doberman Pinscher whose ears had never been properly clipped.

James and I almost didn't get married because of Mingo. At the time James and I started courting—if you can call getting engaged on a Wednesday and married the following Monday a real courtship—there were three women in the house: my mother, whom I called George, my sister and me. Dad was temporarily living in Atlanta, having just changed jobs. Mingo had gotten used to protecting his girls, and he definitely did

not like strange men. The minute James walked in the house, Mingo jumped up on the nearest chair, bared his sharp white teeth and let loose his best professional wrestler growl.

The fact that James refused to be intimidated really floored that dog. He went from puzzlement to shock to actual shame. By the end of our five-day courtship, Mingo would slink away and whine when James came in the door. Poor old dog. I felt that he did at least deserve a little immortality because of his perseverance, so I added him to the cast of *To Have and to Hold*.

The cat, Cabbage, was not patterned after our only resident Siamese cat. Our cat was neither cross-eyed nor female. He was a mean-tempered, macho-type male cat who hated everyone—especially me. From the beginning, he belonged strictly to James. If he ever got *mad* at James, he would come and bite me instead!

Lucifer—he lived down to the name, believe me—came to live with us in 1972. By 1979, when *To Have and to Hold* was written, he was seven years old and smugly secure in his position of Solitary Adored House Cat. I hate smug cats, so I conspired to undermine his position in the household. I bought *another* Siamese cat. This one was female, cross-eyed and loving. She was a totally different kind of cat from Lucifer. I named her Kwan Yin, after the oriental goddess of beauty. Sadly,

her elegant name lasted one day. She was sitting in my lap when a door slammed. Always high-strung, she dug in her *very* sharp claws and took off like a hotrod.

“Awww,” James said, grinning as he eyed my scratches. “Mama’s little Boo-Boo.”

Boo-Boo she is, to this day. But in *To Have and to Hold*, she was Cabbage.

We lost Lucifer in 1989—ten years after he became accustomed to Boo-Boo. She has been a lost soul ever since. Lucifer was seventeen years old, not a bad life span for a beautiful and much-loved old friend. I buried him under my favorite dogwood tree, in the front yard, and planted violets around him. They are almost exactly the color of his eyes.

The secret identity that E. F. McCallum adopts in the book—pretending to be Cal Forrest—springs from my fascination with such heroes as Zorro and Superman when I was a child. I always loved the idea of a secret identity, so I couldn’t resist having Madeline’s boss adopt one during his sick leave. When he revealed his true identity and she had to deal with the differences in their life-styles, I delighted in the resulting drama. I have to confess that I enjoyed the opportunity for some humor, as well. My first two books were rather dark in tone. This one was light and airy, with madcap people and animals. When Madeline dumped the pie on

McCallum's stomach, I laughed until I cried. I could see the syrupy apples running down over that white sweatshirt and hear McCallum yelling his head off. It was my favorite scene. My next favorite was when she backed down her driveway and hit his car. Poor guy. It was nice that he survived their courtship, though.

The scene on the beach in Panama City, Florida, was retracing old paths for me. For many years, my family spent several days every summer on the Miracle Strip in Panama City, shelling and playing in the surf. My sister, Dannis, was just a toddler then. It was so much fun, watching her experience the beach for the first time. We lived in Atlanta then, and she'd never seen anything like the Gulf of Mexico. Neither had I; seagulls and pelicans, bone-white sand and aqua water, were equally fascinating to me. I sat on the balcony of our room and watched the whitecaps break in quick chain reactions at night, with the moon shining down on the dark water. I remember thinking at the time—I was only fourteen—that someday I was going to write a book about the place. Even at that age, writing was all I ever wanted to do.

Well, I did write the book, and *To Have and to Hold* was it. I tried to capture the excitement I felt the first time I saw the Miracle Strip, along with the tangible delight that the atmosphere held for me. I hope I

succeeded.

The Cowboy and the Lady was my first Silhouette Desire, and it wasn't light in tone like *To Have and to Hold*. If anything, it was a dark drama with a very masculine hero and a feminine heroine. Amanda was very much on the defensive with Jace Whitehall, and it was obvious to me from the beginning that she was going to have a hard time.

Jace is my favorite of all the heroes I've ever created. He isn't as complex as some have been, but he has traits that I liked and admired. I often wished that I'd had the space of a longer book, because the chemistry between these two characters was immediate and explosive any time they were together. I have never enjoyed a story as much. Even when I finished the book, I couldn't stop developing the characters. My filing cabinets are full of scenes I couldn't fit into the book. The only other book that affected me so strongly was *To Love and Cherish*. I don't really know why they made such a lasting impression on me. But they did, and I'd still love the opportunity to go back and add more to them.

The idea of having Jace celibate for so long wasn't really something I planned. Like so many facets of a character, this one popped out of thin air and refused to be dislodged. Some people think that long periods of

celibacy are not possible for men. Whether they are or not, Jace said he had been, and I wasn't about to argue with him! Really, this is fiction, and the ideals of romantic love may not be very realistic—but they are beautiful.

Fidelity, honor, loyalty and sacrifice are noble virtues. In bygone eras, they were life itself. A man's word was like money in the bank, a woman's virtue was a pearl beyond price, and honor was worth dying for. Maybe those old-fashioned ideas are out of date, but I still believe in them.

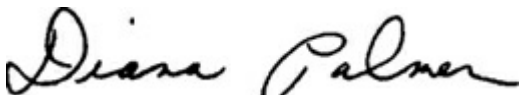
I admired Don Quixote tilting at windmills as he sought to restore honor and nobility to a weary, cynical world. I like characters with noble ideas, virtues beyond price and honor. Being bad is easy. Being good is not. The very rarity of true virtue makes it intriguing to me. Perhaps that's why I enjoy building characters who portray it. And perhaps I saw too many replays of *Man of La Mancha* in my youth! I always have loved windmills, and there are plenty of them in Texas. Cervantes created his character as a Spaniard, but he would have made a great Texan.

All in all, I prefer writing books with Western settings. There is something timeless about a vast plain where men struggle against nature itself to carve a life—or an empire—for themselves. The men who tamed the

West were a special breed. I have enjoyed recreating that pioneer spirit in modern-day cattlemen, in heroes who are, I hope, a little larger than life. If their virtues are slightly magnified, it is to compensate for the flaws of modern society, which are also magnified. Romance fiction offers a brief escape from the pain and pressure of modern life, taking you into a world where the human spirit can be noble and strive for a higher, richer existence. My characters aren't completely true to life—but then, perhaps that's their appeal.

I have enjoyed sharing my rose-colored dreams with you. If they have made your heart a little lighter, your step a little surer, your sadness a little more bearable, then I have succeeded beyond my wildest hopes. May your lives be as bright and joyful as your friendship has made mine. God bless you.

Your friend,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Diana Palmer". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large, stylized "D" and a long, sweeping underline for the name "Palmer".

Also available from Diana Palmer

Heather's Song

The Australian

Magnolia

Renegade

Lone Star Winter

Dangerous

Desperado

Merciless

Heartless

Fearless

Her Kind of Hero

Lacy

Nora

Rawhide and Lace

Unlikely Lover

Man of the Hour

Trilby

Lawman

Hard to Handle

The Savage Heart

Courageous

Lawless

Diamond Spur

The Texas Ranger

Lord of the Desert

The Cowboy and the Lady

The Case of the Mesmerizing Boss

The Case of the Confirmed Bachelor

The Case of the Missing Secretary

Fit for a King

Paper Rose

Rage of Passion

Once in Paris

After the Music

Roomful of Roses

Champagne Girl

Passion Flower

Diamond Girl

Friends and Lovers

Cattleman's Choice

Lady Love

The Rawhide Man

Outsider

Night Fever

Before Sunrise

Protector

Maggie's Dad

Midnight Rider

Matt Caldwell: Texas Tycoon

The Last Mercenary

Carrera's Bride

Heart of Stone

Wyoming Tough

True Blue

Wyoming Fierce

The Rancher

Wyoming Bold

Invincible

Wyoming Strong

Texas Born

The Morcai Battalion: The Recruit

Untamed

The Morcai Battalion: Invictus

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

Diana Palmer



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CHAPTER 1

Madeline heard the bustle of the other girls gathering up purses and sweaters, slamming desk drawers, covering typewriters, and she smiled to herself as she finished typing a letter. It was Friday, and she didn't blame them for hurrying. Most of them were barely out of their teens, and had boyfriends. Friday night meant dinner and a show to them.

But for Madeline Blainn, it meant a steak for one seared on the brick charcoal grill behind her spacious suburban home. At twenty-four, she was a career woman in every sense of the word. Tall, slender, a clotheshorse, she was the envy of her friends, not only for her loveliness, but for her poise as well. Nothing ever rattled Madeline. Not the nervous assistant who helped her handle the home office in Atlanta for her mysterious ever-absent new boss. Not the bustle of

high finance or the screaming pace of dictation and phone calls that went with it. Not even the disagreements that were legion among the girls in the other offices. Nothing ever rattled Madeline.

“Going home tonight?” Brenda teased with a smile as she stopped in the doorway on her way out.

Madeline shrugged her shoulders and gave her friend an easy smile, her dark eyes quiet. “Two more letters to go. Mr. Richards said he was to have them out today—McCallum’s orders,” she added with mock solemnity, and brushed away a strand of auburn hair that curled rebelliously at her eye.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Mystery.” Brenda laughed. “You’d think he’d drop in on his own company once in a while, wouldn’t you? Have you ever seen him at all?”

Madeline shook her head. “Not even once. Of course,” she added mischievously, “I was just across the way with the peons until that promotion two months ago. This building is strictly for the company brass, so it isn’t likely that I’d have seen E.F. McCallum in person.” She frowned. “I wonder what the E.F. stands for? Ever Faithful? Evenly Fried?”

“How about Eccentric Fiend?” Brenda suggested. “After all, they say he’s relentless when it comes to business. You wouldn’t know about that, of course; you only know about the big boss through Mr. Richards.”

She sighed. "Dear old Mr. Richards."

Madeline eyed her. "He's a very nice man until something goes wrong."

"Something always goes wrong," her friend countered.

"He never yells when one of us is out sick," she returned doggedly.

Brenda shook her head. "You'll find at least one nice thing to say about the devil, wouldn't you, dear? Don't you ever wonder what McCallum looks like?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes. But I think I know why nobody ever sees him," she said with a taciturn expression.

"Why?"

"I'll bet he's got terminal acne," Madeline said, "and only goes out with his head in the hood. Or maybe he's so short and wizened that. . . ."

"I've heard all this before. Have a nice weekend, bye!" And Brenda was gone like a small whirlwind.

With a sigh, Madeline finished her letters and signed them with McCallum's name and her initials. They'd still have to be okayed through Mr. Richards, in spite of the fact that she was technically answerable to McCallum only. But, she reasoned, how could she be answerable to a phantom?

She held out a letter and studied the name with a

slight frown. What, she wondered, was E.F. McCallum like? Was he tall, short, old, young? He might have walked through her former office a dozen times, and she'd never known who he was. She'd never even seen a picture of him, because rumor had it that he'd been known to break cameras that were poked in his face. Another argument, she thought wickedly, in favor of the terminal acne theory. . . .

Of course, she reminded herself, McCallum was the head of a dozen corporations just like this one, and probably in each of the international offices he had a man just like Mr. Richards who held the reins of control. But why couldn't he, just once a year or so, stop in to review the troops and let himself be seen? There were always rumors, of course. This month's favorite was that he had a mistress in France and spent the majority of his time in the Paris office for that reason. But there were just as many counter rumors linking him with women all over the world. Nobody really knew McCallum.

Of course, there was the usual bonus every Christmas with his personally signed and much duplicated note of thanks. There was a Christmas card, a very fancy one, with his signature engraved in gold leaf. There was a small gift for each of his personal staff, but no personal contact. Ever.

Perhaps it was just as well, Madeline thought as she finished stuffing the envelopes and stamped them. The mystery had its own delight, and if she wanted to pretend that her never-seen boss was the image of Clark Gable, that was nobody's business. Anyway, a man in a dream was ever so much safer than a real one. After Phillip

She gathered her sweater and purse and went home.

* * *

As she pulled into the long driveway of the suburban house her aunt had willed her, she glanced next door and saw that the workmen were still busy on the patio and swimming pool which were being added to it. The familiar red Jaguar and the familiar blonde, however, were missing. There was a very sedate black Mercedes in the driveway.

The blonde had been a landmark to the neighbors for two years or more. Why a woman of such obvious wealth chose to make her home in this middle-class neighborhood was the subject of much speculation. She never mixed with the neighbors or had anything at all to do with them. Probably, Madeline thought, she was simply too busy for it—which was a kinder sentiment than most of the other residents aired. The majority's opinion was that she was some rich man's mistress. Of

course, there were rarely any visitors who stayed overnight; and even then, the cars were always different, and, Madeline told herself, nobody, not even the super rich came in a new and different luxury car every time.

Dismissing the puzzle, she parked her small economy car under the carport, locked it, and went into the comfortable split-level house that had been the last home of her aunt and uncle. It was really a bigger house than she needed, but it had been home for a number of years now, and she liked the seclusion of the nearby woods, the little stream that ran through the property, and the garden spot to grow things in. Besides, it was a pleasant neighborhood with pleasant people who, thank God, minded their own business and left each other alone. Madeline liked the privacy of it. The tall hedge between her and the blonde was as good as a stone wall, and there was nothing but a small forest of fruit trees on the other side of the house. Trees in the yard sheltered her from the road. It was like a country home although it was just minutes from the sprawling office complex where she worked. And she loved it.

As she walked into the living room, with its clutter of patchwork cushions and earth colors in the furnishings, she saw Sultana stretched lazily on the brown upholstery of the couch, where she had no business being. With a laugh, Madeline swept the lean,

long Siamese cat up in her arms.

“You bad cat,” she chided, watching the crossed blue eyes stare unblinkingly back at her from the smoky gray face in startling contrast to the snowy white that surrounded her points. “You know you don’t belong on the couch. Come here and I’ll feed you.”

She put the young feline on the floor, and Sultana followed her into the kitchen chattering noisily in a voice that sounded like a cross between a squalling baby and a Model-T Ford that couldn’t quite start.

“Noisy, aren’t you?” Madeline laughed. “I don’t know why I bother talking to you, Cabbage, when I don’t speak Siamese any better than you understand English.”

Sultana was the name on the cat’s papers, but Cabbage she had become when she ate a chunk of it that Madeline was shredding for slaw. She’d read somewhere about cats having three names—one for special occasions, one for everyday, and; one that was secret. It seemed to be true. The secret one was probably only to Sultana, too.

Sultana Cabbage made a loud remark as she settled down in front of her bowl. Madeline left her there and went to change clothes, still vaguely curious about that third name.

Minutes later, in a pair of beige slacks with a beige

and white cotton knit blouse, she started a fire in the charcoal grill in the back yard. It was early summer, and the afternoons were warm and pleasant. Madeline loved to eat out on the picnic table and listen to the crickets and June bugs harmonizing in the woods. Especially after a day like today.

She pulled a thick steak from the refrigerator, slapped it on a platter and sliced an onion on top of it.

"I've been looking forward to this all day," she told Cabbage. "Sorry, girl, but it just isn't enough for both of us, and I'm not sharing it."

If cats could grimace, the Siamese did, and gave her what really looked like a I-hope-you-drop-it look.

Madeline went out the back door without paying much attention to her immediate surroundings. The fragrance of blooming shrubs and flowers was everywhere. The sun was low on the horizon, the skies were streaked with red and gold. It was, she sighed, such a beautiful afternoon. Her mind was on that beauty and that luscious steak she was about to cook, and she didn't think about company. That was why she hadn't noticed the large black Doberman pinscher who was walking slightly behind her, sniffing the air and licking his lips.

Seconds later, lying on her back in the grass, staring up into the sharp, white teeth that were grinding up her

thick, red steak, it was impossible not to notice him anymore. He was standing on her stomach with his front paws, and he felt like two bags of wet cement.

Her eyes like saucers, the fear making her mouth dry, she gasped up at him breathlessly, wondering if the steak was going to fill up such a large dog. She felt like a large slab of fresh meat, and it was all she could do to make noise come out of her throat.

“N-nice puppy,” she choked in a loud whisper, as he wolfed down the last tidbit of steak and licked his jowls noisily. “Oh, nnnnice p-puppy! Wouldn’t you like to go run it off now, puppy, hmmmm?” she managed.

“*Puppy?* My God, are you blind?” came a rough, decidedly masculine voice from above her head. “Suleiman, down, you dammed glutton! Down!”

The note of no-nonsense authority in that deep, impatient voice moved the dog immediately. Even Madeline responded to it, getting to her feet with a speed and grace that were a credit to her ballet training.

“Are you hurt?” the voice demanded in a tone that said she’d better not be.

She looked into the face that went with the voice and felt as if she’d been slammed in the stomach with a mallet.

She was five foot seven in her stockinged feet, but

he still dwarfed her. His leonine face was hard and uncompromising and was topped by waving dark hair threaded with silver. He had to be close to forty, but there was not an ounce of flab on that athlete's body. He was all muscle, from the powerful legs in dark slacks to the massive chest and shoulders encased in a spotless white shirt. He was watching her through slitted eyes, eyes so deep-set and narrow she couldn't even tell their color.

"Will you answer me, damn it, or are you dumb as well?" he growled.

Her dark eyes flashed fire at him, and she pushed back her disheveled auburn hair with a hand that trembled despite her attempt at poise.

"The only dumb thing I did," she said in a voice like a straight razor, "was walk out that door unarmed! Tomorrow, so help me, I'll bring a shotgun!"

Something glittered in those narrow eyes, although his face was as hard as a stone wall. He studied her as if she were a new breed of animal, quietly, insolently.

"Well, that's the first time I've ever known Burgundy to pack a punch," he said, his eyes on her hair that was dancing with fiery lights in the late-afternoon glow. "I'm not used to women who fight instead of flirt."

She didn't doubt it. He was attractive, in a rugged,

dark sort of way. But years older than men she was used to, and far too domineering.

“Are you and your horse,” she indicated the dog, who was now sitting on his haunches at the man’s feet, “visiting around here?” she asked hotly.

“In a sense,” he replied. “Bess is in Europe and I’m looking after the place until she gets back.

“Bess?” The name didn’t ring any bells.

“Bess,” he said impatiently, gesturing toward the high hedge.

Oh, Lord, the blonde! A friend of his, no doubt, and judging by the wear on the clothes he had on, he needed some friends. The collar of the shirt was slightly frayed.

Her eyes went to her own clothes. There were two massive pawprints on the once-white slacks. She glared at him. “So, you’re the caretaker? May I express the sincere wish that her absence is short-lived?” she asked testily. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get out of these clothes and finish what I started—my supper! Not that I had more than the one steak, but maybe I can find a moldy piece of bacon in the refrigerator!”

One dark eyebrow went up. “Is that a subtle hint that I owe you a meal?” he asked narrowly.

“It isn’t subtle, and it isn’t a hint,” she fired back. “Your four-legged garbage can ate my steak!”

“If you didn’t expect him to,” he said, “why did

you leave the gate in the hedge open so that he could come through it?"

Her eyes widened as if they meant to pop. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You think I left it open deliberately?" she gasped.

"Why not?" he returned, one big hand jammed in his pocket. His dark eyes studied her slender figure insolently, boldly with a practiced deliberation that made her blood riot in her veins. "But you're wasting your time," he added. "I like my women fuller around the...."

"How dare you?" she choked furiously.

He snapped his fingers, and the big dog immediately came to heel. "Kindly keep that gate closed in future and turn your attentions in some other direction. I've got all the women I need, and I don't like such obvious tactics."

"You . . . you . . ." she sought wildly for just the right word. ". . . Yankee!" she finished desperately, her face flushed, her hair and eyes wild.

"Me?" He shrugged. "I was raised in Miami." He started toward the gate. "I don't want to have to follow my dog over here again. Ever," he added with a cold flick of a glare.

Her fists clenched at her sides. "If you do," she replied harshly, "wear armor!"

But he wasn't even listening; his broad back insolent and uncaring was turned to her. With a muffled cry of anger, she turned and marched back into the house, slamming the door behind her with all her might. Her only comfort was that her co-workers couldn't see her. The unflappable Miss Blainn was definitely flapped.

CHAPTER 2

The black Mercedes was gone the next morning, and it didn't reappear until Monday, much to Madeline's relief. It had been an eventless weekend, and a lonely one, and it had been marred by the unpleasantness of its beginning.

As Madeline got into her own car to start out to work, she mentally cursed a fate that had made her only close neighbor such a barracuda. Why couldn't he have been some nice old retired man with a...."

She was backing out of the driveway as she was thinking, and the sudden metallic thud that brought her small car to a screaming halt shook her. Trembling, she glanced in the rear-view mirror to see the black Mercedes stopping and its door opening.

Her eyes closed momentarily as she opened her door. Why me, Lord? she wondered silently as the

stormy, taciturn giant came toward her with narrowed, glittering eyes.

“How many driver’s license inspectors did you have to get drunk before you talked them into giving you a license?” he said shortly. “My God, do you drive with your eyes closed?”

Her lips made a thin line. She looked up at him, and it was a long way even in her two-inch heels. “Only when I’m backing over my neighbors,” she replied tightly. “Sorry I missed.”

He glared down at her. “What you need, young woman, are some manuals on safe driving.”

“What you need, old man,” she countered, “are some tips on how to behave like a gentleman.” Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Oh, excuse me, now I remember, I’m only doing it to attract your attention, isn’t that so?” She smiled sweetly. “Next time, I’ll wear a bikini when I back into you. Sorry I don’t have time to bat my eyelashes at you any more, but I’ll be late for work. You’ll send me a bill for the damages, I’m sure.”

“You can count on it!” he said in a voice like Arctic snow.

She glanced around him at the front bumper, where a dent the size of a half dollar was barely visible. She shook her head and sighed. “Such a lot of damage. You may need to garnish my wages. I’ll tell you what, just

send the bill to Evenly Fried McCallum, and he'll pay it—I'm his private secretary, you know, and worth my weight in diamonds. I chase him, too," she said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Bill whom?" he echoed, both eyebrows arching, his dark eyes incredulous.

"Excuse me, E. F. McCallum was what I meant to say," she replied. "Only his friends get to call him 'Evenly Fried.' It's the McCallum Corporation. You may have heard of it."

"I may have." His eyes narrowed, studying her quietly. "You work for McCallum, do you? What does the old man look like?"

"He's short and bald and has terminal acne," she replied smartly. "And he doesn't like his employees to be late. I am sorry about your car—but it's your own fault, you should never drive past my house when I'm backing down my driveway."

She turned and got back into her little car.

"Honey, from now on, I'll head for the nearest ditch when I see you coming," he replied in that deep, slow voice, but there was a hint of a smile on his swarthy face. "Watch where you're going from now on. I don't have time for these little eyecatching maneuvers of yours. I've already told you, you're not my type," he added deliberately, almost casually.

“You conceited, lily-livered son of a . . . ” she sputtered after him.

“Nice try, but flattery doesn’t move me either,” he replied quietly, not even pausing in his measured stride.

“Ooooooh!” she screamed. But he wasn’t listening.

Madeline spent her entire break grumbling about her new neighbor while Brenda tried not to laugh too hard.

“Looks like he’s getting you flapped. Is he good-looking? Married?” Brenda probed gently.

“He’s ancient,” came the hot reply. “Gray at the temples, big as a barn and he runs all over people. And if he’s married, it has to be to Saint Joan!”

Brenda laughed. “That bad, huh?” A thought came to her, and her eyes widened suddenly. “Oh, you haven’t heard the latest news yet! Guess who’s in town?”

“Charlton Heston!” she replied in mock pleasure.

“No, not Charlton Heston,” Brenda sighed. “McCallum!”

Madeline’s eyebrows arched. “McCallum? Here? Really? Where?”

Brenda laughed. “Nobody knows where. They say he’s taking some time off, though, so he won’t be around the office. His doctors are making him slow down, escape from business pressures. So he’s in town but not in town.”

“Oh.” That was vaguely disappointing. “If his health is that bad, he must be pretty old.”

“I hear his health is bad because he’s been pushing himself right over the edge. His wife and son were killed in an airplane crash a few years ago. They say he gives everything that’s in him to the corporation now . . . I guess he must be horribly lonely. All that money and power, and nobody to care about him. Poor old man.”

“Poor is right,” Madeline sighed. “Money can’t buy absolution. He must hate being alive. He must feel all kinds of guilt because they died and he didn’t.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“It doesn’t occur to most people,” she said in a husky whisper, with a smile that never touched her eyes.

Brenda clasped her hand warmly. “Phillip wouldn’t want you to feel guilt. Honey, he’d have been the last person . . .”

“Please!” Madeline turned away, biting her lip to stem the rush of tears.

“Sorry. I thought . . . I mean, it’s been a year, going on two years . . .”

She straightened and forced a smile to her lips. “And I should be getting over it. I know. I will. I’ve gone on living, haven’t I?”

Brenda’s gaze was piercing. “Have you? No dates in

all that time, no social activities, no parties, no nothing. You work. You go home. You eat. You sleep. How long are you going to walk around dead?"

She felt her face going white. "I . . . I . . ."

"This morning, for the first time in over a year, I saw you *feel* something," Brenda persisted. "God love that neighbor of yours, honey, he's breathed some life into you."

Madeline stared at the toes of her shoes. "I hadn't realized I'd been like that." She smiled. "I guess you're right, I really did feel something this morning. In court, I believe it's called homicidal rage."

"Been talking to Cousin Horace again?" Her friend laughed. "He's still after the house, I guess?"

"With a vengeance." Madeline shook her head. "Every time he calls, the first thing he asks is when am I going to marry somebody and let him inherit. Little does he know that I plan to die a spinster just to keep him from getting it."

"I thought you liked the guy."

"I do. He's a good attorney and a nice man, and he's the only first cousin I have left. But," she added, "he does have this thing about money, and I don't think he's ever forgiven Uncle Henry and Aunt Charlotte for leaving everything to me. The clause about the house and property reverting to Horace when I marry was

probably just to pacify him.

“Too bad first cousins can’t marry.”

Madeline made a face. “Yuuuch! If you’d ever seen Horace, you wouldn’t wish him on me!”

Brenda sighed. “I’d wish him on me. Do you know the last date I had was with a . . . ” and the conversation drifted back to Brenda’s favorite topic—her nonexistent love life.

The day seemed unusually long, and soon after Madeline got home the walls seemed to start closing in on her. She was vaguely restless, unsatisfied, and that had never happened before—not in recent years, anyway.

She left Cabbage curled up on a rug and went out the back door, barefoot, her mind on the tiny stream at the back of the property and how cool the water would feel. Dressed in white shorts and a lacy pink top, she made her way through the sparse woods, trying to walk carefully enough that the bark and pine needles and twigs didn’t rip the soles of her feet apart. Before she finally reached the bank of the cool little stream, she wished a hundred times that she’d worn sandals.

The stream was nestled in a green glade with wildflowers curling along the shady bank, and the water was sweet and cold and clear. She waded in it contentedly, careful not to splash water on her spotless

shorts while she felt the rocks smooth and hard under her tender feet.

She closed her eyes on a sigh, feeling the wind in her face, hearing the murmur and gurgle of the water and the heavy thud and crackle of leaves as something came bounding towards her.

“Arrrrrff!”

Her eyes flew open at the loud bark as the Doberman came into the water with a mighty leap, and she screamed and slipped and fell with a great splash right into the water.

She glared furiously at the beast. He sat down in the water, eyeing her carelessly and watching her frantic efforts to sit up and smooth the wild fury of her hair.

“Urrrrrrr!” he purred, and seemed to grin, if dogs could.

“Ooooooh!” she groaned angrily. “You great clumsy beast! Why can’t you stay at home and eat *his* steaks and push *him* into the water? Hmmm?”

He shook his wide black head, his sharp ears pricked as he enjoyed the water gurgling over his fur. “Ruff!” he replied, leaning forward with his long, thin nose as if to emphasize the playful bark.

With a sigh and a shake of her head, she relaxed in the stream and brought her knees up to wrap her arms around them. “Ruff to you, too, Charlie horse,” she

murmured. "I hope you do realize that if that awful old man you live with catches us together, there's going to be an awful scene? Oh, well." She let her forehead rest on her arms. "All right, sit there. But do be quiet, okay?"

"Asssruth," he said in a low bark.

"Nice puppy." She reached out a slender hand and let him sniff it before she ran it over the sleek, silky fur over his eyes. He settled down in the stream beside her, and the water ran quietly around them both.

Only a few minutes had passed, and Madeline was lost in the peace and quiet of the glade when a rude voice shattered the enchanted silence.

"Suleiman! So there you are, you damned fugitive!"

Oh no, not again, Madeline groaned silently, looking up to find her neighbor on his way through the young trees, his look as black as the matching slacks and shirt he wore.

He stood at the bank and looked down at her, his hand idly going to the giant dog as it clambered up on dry land to sit and look contentedly up at him.

"Why," he asked quietly, "are you sitting in the water fully clothed?"

She met his level gaze narrowly. "Why," she returned, "don't you ask your horse?"

He blinked. "My what?"

“That black one there. Remember him? He’s the one who had supper with me last week—and went for a swim with me today.” Her eyes blazed. “I can’t wait to see what he does next; every day’s a new adventure!”

He eyed her suspiciously. “He was on a lead,” he said, nodding toward the dog. “And I don’t think he’d have broken it without some coaxing.”

That was the last straw. She could hear her quickened breathing, feel the fury choking in her throat. “You think I lured him down here?” she asked tightly.

One heavy, dark eyebrow went up. He stuck his hands in his pockets and lifted his head arrogantly, studying her. “Did you?” he asked finally.

Her full lips made a thin line. “And I suppose I moved next door to you in order to attract your attention, too?” she persisted.

“It’s been done,” he replied matter-of-factly.

She stood up, ignoring the water that trickled down from her wet shorts in a downpour and stuck her hands on her slender hips. “Shall we have the gloves off?” she asked quietly, barely containing her temper. “Point number one, you’re years too old for me, and even if you weren’t, I am off men. Period. Point number two,” she continued, ignoring the sudden flash of his dark eyes, “I grew up in this house. It was my uncle and aunt’s, and I’ve been here for over eighteen years.

Hardly,” she added with chilling politeness, “an attempt to attract your attention . . . Mr. . . . Mr. whoever you are!”

One dark eyebrow went up. “You really don’t know, do you? Call me Cal.”

“There are a lot of things I’d rather call you,” she remarked, still sizzling under her studied calm.

“Don’t strain yourself.” His dark eyes slid up and down her slender figure. “So I’m too old for you, am I?”

She flushed uncomfortably but stood her ground. “Yes, you are.”

“How old are you?”

“It’s none of your business—but I’m twenty-four,” she replied.

“*Touché*” he told her. “All right, Burgundy, let’s call it a draw and put up the gloves. I bought this property for a refuge. I don’t want it turned into an armed camp. Pax?”

She eyed him warily. “You started it,” she said defensively.

“I can finish it, too,” he said, the authority in his deep voice arresting. “I’ll ask you once more—pax?”

That or nothing, he didn’t have to say it, it was there in his dark, unsmiling face. She grimaced. “Pax,” she ground out.

“Like pulling teeth, isn’t it?” he asked. “Need a

hand?"

She shook her head stubbornly, giving the Doberman a nasty glance as she found her way to the bank, careful not to slip again on the water-polished stones, where the ripples played.

She shifted from one foot to the other in the soft, cushy grass near the tree trunks to dry her toes.

"Suleiman knocked you down, didn't he?" he asked her.

She nodded. "He didn't mean to," she said, defending the big beast sprawled at his master's feet. "He's just an overgrown puppy."

"Come at me with a stick and you'll see what kind of a 'puppy' he is," he replied flatly. "I'll walk you home. It's getting late."

She studied the hard, leonine face with a curiosity she couldn't hide. He was used to giving orders, that showed. In experience, much less age, he was by far her superior, and his face was hard with lessons she had yet to learn. She felt a sense of loneliness in those dark deep-set eyes and wondered vaguely if he ever smiled.

"Suit yourself," he said, taking her silence for protest. He turned, gesturing the dog to his side.

She ran to catch up with him, grimacing as her feet hit sharp bits of bark and twigs. "You are," she breathed, "the most exasperating man . . . !"

He glanced at her. "You're not McCallum's average secretary. Where did he find you?" he asked suddenly.

He had her attention now. "You know him?" she asked excitedly.

"We've done business together," he said easily. "Answer me. How did you get the job?"

"You might ask, instead of making it sound like an order," she grumbled. "Mr. Richards hired me, promoted me, that is. I've been at the engineering offices for the past four years."

They walked in silence for several steps. "Why are you off men?" he asked suddenly.

Her eyes misted, softened with the memory as she stared blankly straight ahead. "I had a fiance once. He died," she said gently, in a tone laced with pain and memory and the sweetness of loving.

"When?"

She shrugged. "Well over a year ago, in an airplane crash, two days before the wedding. Isn't that ironic?" she added with a hollow laugh. She drew a quick breath, and smiled suddenly. "Would it give away any deep, dark secrets if you told me what McCallum looks like? You have seen him, haven't you?"

She met his quiet gaze and noted with a shock that his eyes were gray, not dark at all. Gray, like water-sparkled crystal in that swarthy face, under those heavy

eyelids.

A corner of his mouth went up in a bare hint of amusement, and his eyes seemed to dance. "He's old and bald and women follow him around like puppies. You didn't know how close you were to the truth this morning, did you, Burgundy?"

She laughed, the sadness gone from her face. "I thought he might have two noses and wear his head in a bag, and that's why we never saw him," she explained.

He chuckled; it was a deep, pleasant sound that made magic in the enchantment of the forest in late afternoon.

She glanced at the pine straw on the ground. "I'm sorry I lost my temper at you. I don't usually, I'm very even-tempered."

He studied her face, his expression cool but with none of the wary curiosity that had been in it before. "There's a reason for the way I was with you," he told her solemnly. "I've been chased too much, and by pros. I'm not a poor man."

"I thought you were," she admitted shyly, watching as the house came into view through the trees. "That was a low blow, asking if you were the caretaker, but I was so mad. . . ."

"You thought that?" he asked in disbelief.

She frowned up at him. "Well, your shirt was frayed

at the collar, and your car is a rather *old* Mercedes. . . .”

“My God. That’s a first.”

She turned and stood looking up at him at the edge of the yard. “It’s all the same to me if you live in a palace or a log cabin. I don’t choose my friends by their bank accounts, and don’t think I haven’t had the opportunity.”

His eyes studied her flushed face with a strange intensity. “Yet you spend your time alone, don’t you, Burgundy? No close friends, no socializing . . . don’t you know that you can’t hide from life, little girl?”

Her jaw stiffened. “My life pleases me.”

“It’s your funeral, honey,” he shrugged indifferently.

She glanced at the hedge, a thought nagging the perimeter of her mind. “You said . . . you bought that property?” She frowned. “Does the lady rent it from you?”

“Bess?” He pondered that for a moment. “In a sense.”

“Oh,” she said, accepting the explanation. “Well . . . I’d better go in now. Good night, Cal . . . Cal what?” she asked.

“Forrest,” he replied after a pause. “Good night, Burgundy.”

“My . . . my name is Madeline. Madeline Blainn,” she told him.

His narrow eyes scanned her flushed face with its tiny scattering of freckles. "Burgundy suits you better. Good night," he called over his shoulder.

She stood at her back porch and watched him until his broad back disappeared through the hedge, the Doberman at his heels.

There was a subtle shift in their relationship after that. She waved to him when they happened to pass, when she was in the yard or driving past his house. And he waved back. There was a comradeship in the simple gestures that puzzled her. She found herself absently looking for her neighbor and his black Mercedes wherever she went. In the grocery store. When she went shopping at one of the sprawling malls. At the theater where she went to an occasional movie. In some strange sense, he represented security to her, although she couldn't begin to understand why.

On an impulse one Saturday, she baked a deep-dish apple pie and carried it next door, braving his anger at an intrusion he might not want.

"Cal?" she called as she reached the carport, shifting the pie plate in her hands as she tried to find the source of the metallic noises coming from there. "Where are you?"

"Here."

"Here, where?" she asked, looking around her, but

there was only empty space unless she counted the Mercedes.

“Here, damn it!” he growled and suddenly appeared from under the rear of the car, flat on his back on the creeper, his white T-shirt liberally spotted and smeared with grease, a wrench in one hand. “What the hell do you want?” he demanded in an exceptionally bad-tempered tone of voice.

All her good intentions vanished. “I wanted to give you something,” she said.

“Oh? What?” he asked curtly.

“This.” She dumped the pie, upside down, onto his flat stomach, watching as it spread down the sides of his white jersey. “I hope you enjoy it.”

She turned on her heel, her lips in a straight line as she carried the empty pie plate home, ignoring the string of blue curses that followed her. So much for the truce, she thought wistfully.

* * *

Once she got over the attack of bad temper, she could laugh at what she’d done. Even if he never spoke to her again, it would be hard to forget the look on his dark face as he stared incredulously at the apple pie on his stomach. Serves him right, she thought as she sat down to the kitchen table and cut a slice of the other pie she’d

made. Of all the unneighborly. . . .

The insistent buzz of the door bell interrupted her thoughts. With a sigh, she left the untouched slice of pie on the table and went to open the back door. The object of her irritation was standing there, head cocked to one side, eyes narrowed. He'd changed into tan slacks and a patterned tan knit pullover, and apparently his surge of temper was over, too.

"I thought someone should tell you," he began deeply, "that when they said the way to man's heart was through his stomach, they didn't mean to dump food on it."

The statement, and the taciturn way he made it, broke through her reserve. The laughter started, and she couldn't stop before tears were tumbling down her flushed cheeks.

"Oh, I am sorry," she apologized, "but I'd been baking all morning, and I thought you might like a fresh pie, and. . . ."

"I'm bad tempered when I'm in the middle of something," he replied. "A clamp on the muffler came loose . . . oh, hell, Burgundy, I'm not used to women in broad daylight, much less women who can cook!"

That made her blush, and she stared at the door. "I've got another pie, if you'd like a slice." There was a silence, and she looked up quickly, embarrassed. "I'm

sorry, you're in a hurry, I imagine, and I've got to go to the store!"

"Don't panic," he said quietly. "You're not the kind of woman who throws herself at a man. I've learned that about you, if nothing else. I'm not in a hurry, and you don't have to go to the store. I'd like that pie."

"I . . . I . . . " She took a deep breath and stood aside. "Won't you come in?"

She motioned him to the table while she got down coffee mugs and another slice of pie. Meanwhile, Cabbage came in to see what the disturbance was all about and stood watching the newcomer with her crossed eyes intent and wary.

"Purebred?" he asked, leaning down to let the cat sniff at his hands before she began to purr and scrape her cheeks against it.

"Yes," Madeline replied, setting a cup of coffee and a slice of pie in front of him at the table. "Her name's really Sultana, but I call her Cabbage."

He scratched the cat's ears. "Do you show her?"

She shook her head. "Those lovely crossed eyes would disqualify her in any real competition, she's little more than breeding stock. But I liked her because she wasn't perfect."

He took a bite of pie and nodded. "It tastes better than it felt," he said with a glance in her direction.

She grinned self-consciously. "Sorry about that. If it's any consolation, you didn't do my ears much good."

"I never pretended to be a saint."

"God knows, you'd never be accused of it."

He finished the pie and leaned back, satisfied, to sip his coffee, taking it black, as she had half expected. He set the mug on the table and pulled a cigarette from the package in his pocket. "Do you mind?" he asked formally.

She shook her head.

"Want one?"

"I don't smoke." She got up to get him an ashtray from the counter and set it in front of him.

"No lecture?" he asked with deliberate mockery.

"I live my life as I please," she told him. "I think other people have the right to do the same."

He lit the cigarette and threw his arm over the back of the chair, watching her through a cloud of smoke. He seemed to fill the room, not only with his size, but with the raw force of his personality. His dark, masculine vitality clung like the cologne he wore.

"I think it's time you and I did some straight talking," he said finally. His eyes narrowed, glittering across at her. "How would you feel about having an affair with me?"

CHAPTER 3

She could feel the blood draining out of her face, the astonishment making her eyes widen and darken with shock. Had she heard him right?

He chuckled softly. “Never mind, words couldn’t say it any better than the look on your face. All right, Burgundy, I get the message. As you said before, I’m years too old for you.”

She caught her breath, taking a sip of the hot coffee as she searched for something to say. “You say the most outrageous things,” she said breathlessly.

“The best defense is a good offense, didn’t you know that?” He sobered, setting the mug down and leaning forward. His forearms crossed on the table as his eyes met hers. “You need someone, little girl. You have a haunted look about you when you think no one’s watching. You’re years too young for that kind of ache,

that kind of loneliness. All I can offer you is friendship, but I think it might help us both. In a real sense, I'm as alone as you are, Burgundy."

She met his gaze levelly. "Are you?"

He studied her in silence for a long time. "I've had women, Burgundy. I think you knew that already. And I'll still have them. I'm a man, with all a man's needs, I can't live like a monk."

She felt the flush returning. Even with Phillip, there hadn't been this kind of adult conversation, this frankness . . . even their kisses had been gentle, undemanding

"That's none of my business," she managed in what she hoped was a calm voice.

"No, it isn't. No more than your sex life is any business of mine . . . if you even have one." He took a deep breath. "The only way a relationship between us is going to work is if we keep it on a non-physical level. Men and women aren't usually *friends*," he added, stressing the last word just enough to make his meaning clear.

"I know that." She studied her hands on her lap. "You didn't ask, but I'll tell you anyway. I've never had a lover, and I don't want one. But I do, very badly, need a friend. Some one to . . . hold onto, who won't make demands I can't meet. Someone just to talk to and do

things with....”

“My God, maybe I ought to just adopt you!”

She jerked her eyes up to his, puzzled at the anger there. “But you just said. . . .”

“Never mind. Never mind, I said,” he growled as she opened her mouth. He gulped down his coffee. “Thanks for the pie. I’ve got a few phone calls to make.”

She bent her head, staring down into the black, glimmering liquid in her coffee cup, stung almost to tears by the whip in his voice, the anger that she couldn’t understand. She couldn’t answer him, not without having him hear the tears in her voice.

“Burgundy?” he asked gruffly.

She shook her head, trying to convey in that non-verbal message that there was nothing wrong.

She heard his footsteps move closer, until he was standing beside her, his hands clenched into fists in his pockets.

He sighed deeply, and one big hand came out of the pocket to tip her face up, very gently, to his view.

“I’m forty years old,” he said tightly.

She forced a tremulous smile to her lips. “I won’t kick your crutches out from under you, if that’s what you’re worried about,” she whispered.

His eyes closed, and an involuntary deep chuckle shook his chest. “Oh, my God, what am I letting myself

in for? Eat your pie, you impudent little upstart. I'll see you later."

* * *

Several days passed. They had waved to each other a few times but it was the middle of the week before she spoke to him again, and in the most unexpected way of all.

She was sprawled on the couch, feeling the day's tension drain slowly out of her, when the jangle of the phone burst onto the pleasant silence like a broken record.

With a muffled curse, she went to answer it.

Resenting the intrusion, she picked up the receiver reluctantly and put it to her ear. "Hello," she said dully.

"Tired, Burgundy?" came a familiar deep voice, and her pulse unexpectedly ran away. "What are you doing?"

"I'm . . . what do you want?" she countered lightly, with a glow on her face that would have shocked her if she'd seen it in a mirror.

"Company," he said flatly. "The walls are shrinking over here. How about coming over for that steak I owe you?"

"You can cook?" she asked impudently.

"Can I cook?" he echoed incredulously. "My God, I

can make snake taste like pheasant under glass!”

“I only asked. How soon do I have to be there?”

“Ten minutes. And, honey, don’t dress up,” he added. “I’m so damned sick of evening gowns and long dresses . . . I haven’t even put on a tie.”

“Listen, I have this terrific overall ensemble with suspenders . . .” she began enthusiastically.

But she was talking to herself. He’d hung up. Muttering about impatient men, she pulled on a pink V-necked top over a pair of white slacks, ran a brush through her long auburn hair and pinned it on top of her head, and added the slightest touch of makeup.

Cal answered the door, casually dressed in white slacks with a deep blue silk shirt that showed his muscular arms to advantage and which hung slightly open in front to reveal black, curling hair and bronze skin. Everything about him was intensely masculine, even the musky cologne that clung to his hard strong body as she brushed past him.

“Five minutes,” he said, glancing at his watch, “I’ve never known a woman to be so punctual. Are you that efficient on the job?”

“I try to be,” she said with a smile as he motioned her into the rich deep brown decor of the living room with its pale carpet and brown and off-white drapes. It had a faintly African flavor, right down to the hand-

carved statuettes of lions and gazelles.

"I spent some time in Africa years ago," he said, noticing her preoccupation with the furnishings. "I like the art particularly."

"So do I. Very much."

He came away from the tall, mahogany bar with two glasses in his hands and set one in front of her on a coaster on the coffee table. "It's a Tom Collins," he said. "I hope you like gin."

"I . . . uh," she faltered, "I don't exactly know how you're going to take this, but I don't drink."

He blinked at her. "You don't what?" he asked politely.

"I don't drink. Thanks anyway," she said, trying to ignore the glass facing her.

"Is there some particular reason for that hang-up?" he asked curiously, leaning a muscular forearm over the back of the sofa while he studied her through narrowed, wary eyes. "I didn't ask you over here with the intention of getting you drunk and seducing you."

She blushed, and he saw it. A strange expression crossed his rugged face.

"I don't like alcohol," she said quietly. "That's the honest-to-God truth, and you can take it any way you like. It makes me sick to drink it."

"Burgundy, you are one hell of a puzzle to me," he

said, shaking his dark head as he studied her. "I'll be damned if you aren't. You don't drink, don't smoke, don't chase men, don't put on airs . . . and you can still blush. Have you ever slept in a man's arms, little girl?"

The blush deepened, and she looked away. "I came over for supper, I thought," she reminded him.

"I've got a casserole in the oven," he said. "With ten more minutes to go—potatoes au gratin. Do you have to wear your hair like that? I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it."

"Don't argue. I get enough of that everywhere else." He reached out a big hand and carefully pulled out the hairpins, as if he had every right. And she didn't try to stop him as the auburn tresses drifted in wisps down around her face and shoulders. "That's better," he said in a deep, lazy voice. His fingers tangled it gently, and the careless action had an effect on her pulse that she didn't even want to acknowledge. "No hair spray," he commented. "Just soft and natural and silky to touch. There's nothing artificial about you is there, honey?"

Her eyes were on that broad chest where the shirt strained open across a mat of curling dark hair. The scent of his cologne was everywhere. The vibrancy of his big body seemed to be reaching across the space that separated them, drawing her towards him. He made her feel sensations that were new and exciting and vaguely

frightening. She couldn't get her breath this close to him, a discovery that brought her heart into her throat.

Her eyes were on his mouth, watching the hard masculine lines of it curve suddenly, gently, into a semblance of a smile. His fingers touched her throat gently, where the pulse was slamming at its walls. His skin was masculine and dark against that white softness.

"Your heart's going very fast, little one," he murmured lazily. "Are you afraid of me?"

"I don't know you very well," she managed in a loud whisper.

"That explains it then," he said with a smile in his voice. He took his hand away. "Come help me with the steaks."

"You can slice the onions," he added wickedly, going ahead of her into the kitchen.

"You said that as if you actually knew that they make me cry," she teased, getting her balance back with the distance between them.

"I guessed. Here, don't cut yourself," he added, handing her a sharp knife and an onion.

The kitchen, for so large a house, was unusually small. All through the preparations, she had to brush against him as she worked, and every fleeting contact with that rock-hard masculine body made her tingle. By the time it was ready, she was visibly shaken, despite

her efforts not to let it show.

Just as they started to sit down to eat, he came up behind her and caught her waist from behind with two powerful hands.

“You remind me of Cabbage,” he said at her ear, his breath warm on the soft skin. “Will it make it any easier if I kiss you, little girl?”

The trembling started in the pit of her stomach and worked up and down her body until he could feel the vibration.

Her fingers caught at his, cold and almost pleading. “S . . . supper will get cold,” she whispered nervously.

He chuckled gently. “All right. Here.” He let her go and seated her at the table with an old-world courtesy.

The meal was delicious when she calmed down enough to taste it properly, and Cal, blast him, sat there looking like a lion studying its prey. Leaning back, every muscle in those big arms, that broad chest, was visible against the electric blue of his shirt that emphasized the darkness of his wavy hair, his complexion. His eyes glittered at her across the width of the table.

“Well, how is it?” he asked as she finished her serving of casserole.

“Not bad at all,” she said, “for a man, that is.”

“Female chauvinist pig” he returned, pausing to light a cigarette. “Burgundy, do you like to fly?”

She paled. “No!” she whispered unsteadily.

His eyes narrowed with sudden insight. “I see. I don’t mean that kind of airplane, though. I mean a small, light aircraft. We could fly down to Panama City and swim in the Gulf.”

Her startled eyes met his. “Light aircraft?” she echoed.

“A Cessna.” He leaned his elbows on the table and studied her. “Honey, you can’t live in the past. You can’t let old terrors haunt you. When your time’s up, it’s up, no matter what you happen to be doing, don’t you know that? Fear is a kind of disease, Burgundy. Come with me and take the cure.”

She swallowed hard. “When?”

“Saturday. We’ll leave at daybreak and spend the day.”

“What if I get airsick?” she asked.

“We’ll carry some extra pots and pans,” he replied coolly, with a broad wink. “Come on, Burgundy. I’ll take care of you.”

“All . . . all right,” she agreed. He’d said he’d take care of her, and she knew instinctively that he would. It eased the old fears.

“That’s the spirit,” he said gently.

“Cal,” she asked suddenly, “if you don’t mind my asking, what do you do?”

Both eyebrows went up. “Didn’t I tell you? I import banana plants for families in Newfoundland.”

She stared at him. “But bananas won’t grow in Newfoundland. . . .”

He put his finger to his lips. “Shhhhhh!”

She burst out laughing, and it was the last time she asked him the question.

It didn’t take her long to learn that he could say the most outrageous things with apparent sincerity. His wit was drier than desert sand, and he enjoyed a good joke as much as anyone. But for all that, he was a deadly serious man who didn’t smile often, and rarely laughed. Sometimes his eyes were full of such an aching pain that she deliberately teased him to ease it.

The trip to Panama City was easier than she expected it to be, and far shorter. She did get a little airsick, but she took a motion sickness pill and stopped looking down, and it passed. In no time at all they were sharing a huge beach blanket on the white sand where crowds of tourists covered the long stretch of wave-kissed beach. Cal booked them into separate rooms in a hotel right on the beach, with balconies that overlooked the Gulf of Mexico. She hadn’t expected to stay the night, and she was a little apprehensive, but when he promised to let her pay him back for the accommodations, she let her protests slide. It had been

so long since she'd flown—yet when she did it she found there was nothing to it, nothing at all. And on this weekend vacation she realized how long it had been since she'd really enjoyed life like this, since she'd buried her memories and taken a look around her.

A trickle of cool sand on her bare stomach brought her out of her own mind to jackknife into a sitting position. She glared at Cal, who was leaning on an elbow, his bronzed, muscular body devastating in white swimming trunks that revealed powerful legs, a flat stomach and a wedge of hair spreading from his chest down into his trunks. All up and down the beach, women walked by and watched him, flirting with him, some of them far younger than Madeline.

She brushed at the sand on her belly. "That," she told him, "was vicious."

"Don't you know the old saying . . . if you get sand in your navel, you'll come back to Panama City?" he asked straight-faced.

Her eyes sparkled with humour. "Is that so?" she asked, and reached for a handful of the warm white sand beside the blanket.

"Oh, no, you don't," he said, reaching for the sand-filled slender hand.

"Oh, yes, I do," she laughed, struggling to get her hand away from that steely grasp.

She wrestled with him furiously, trying to get the grainy sand onto that massive chest, but all she succeeded in doing was getting it all over herself.

“My Uncle Henry . . . warned me about . . . men like you!” she gasped, laughing as he finally tired of the conflict and rolled her over onto her back, holding her wrists above her head on the towel.

“You should have listened to him,” Cal chuckled softly. He looked down at her flushed face, the wild spray of auburn hair making a halo around it. The rare smile left his chiseled mouth as he looked at her with narrowed, darkening eyes, letting them sketch the soft curves of her body with an intent boldness that left her breathless.

Abruptly, he let her go and rolled over to find his cigarettes and lighter. “Miami’s a lot like this,” he said conversationally as he lit a cigarette. “Salt, sea smell, sultry breezes, white sand and long horizon . . . ever been there, Burgundy?”

She sat up and toyed with her hair in a haze of self-consciousness as her mind acknowledged that she hadn’t wanted him to let her go.

“Miami?” she murmured. “No, I haven’t.”

“You haven’t flown in a long time, have you?”

She let her eyes drop to the sparkle of the white sand, as the crowds made a dull din around them. “Not

since it happened. It wasn't bad at all, though," she admitted with a tiny smile. "The anticipation was really the worst of it. Once we were in the air, I was too airsick to care what happened."

"I thought you were a smart girl," he remarked, propped on one elbow, "or I'd have told you to fill your stomach before we went up. You're backwards in some ways, little one."

She felt her cheeks going red. "Are you always so flattering?" she asked sarcastically.

He reached out and caught a long strand of auburn hair, giving it a far from gentle jerk. "I don't have to pull my punches with you, honey, any more than you have to pull yours with me. I'm used to saying what I think, and I'm too old to change."

She glanced at him impishly. "Are you old, Mr. Forrest? Gracious me, my Uncle Henry used to say that old men could have evil designs on us young girls," she said in her best Southern drawl.

His eyes narrowed, and he very deliberately jabbed the cigarette into the sand. "You'll pay for that one, young woman," he said, and she saw the narrow flash of intent in his eyes barely in time to leap up and run for the ocean.

He caught her before she reached the water, and she found herself being lifted high in those big arms, held

tight against a wall of vibrant power with glittering gray eyes burning down into hers.

“Old am I?” he growled, swinging her back as he aimed at an incoming wave.

She clung to his warm, hard shoulders with all her might, burying her face in his throat. “Oh, don’t, please don’t, Mist’ Rhett, you wouldn’t throw me to the sharks, would you, Mist’ Rhett?” she pleaded impishly.

He stopped, looking down at her with a thoughtful smile on his lips. “You’re right, the sharks don’t deserve that kind of punishment.”

She swung her small fist at his chest. “Beast!”

He caught her fingers and unclenched them as he set her back on her feet, slowly, deliberately moving her hand into the black hair over his warm muscles.

Stunned, she looked up, met his searching gaze and froze there, her heart racing as they stood there in the boiling sun. She’d never been more aware of a man. Never. This close, he filled the world and she wanted to touch him, to explore that vibrant masculinity. Involuntarily her fingers began to move. . . .

“Look out, Mister, oh look out!” came a childish squeal behind him, and the next instant Madeline and Cal both went down under a massive wave bearing two wet youngsters on air mattresses.

Cal came up for air, tossing his hair with grace as his

eyes opened. He reached out a big hand and helped Madeline to her feet.

“Gee, Mister, we’re sorry!” a boy called as he ran back toward the Gulf with his air mattress under his arm.

“God, so am I,” Cal said in a soft undertone, his eyes saying more than words as he looked down into an oval face that was suddenly very red.

* * *

That night, instead of eating in the hotel, Cal walked Madeline out the front door into the dark, neon-light dotted evening that smelled of sea air and smothering heat.

“We’ll walk,” he chuckled, motioning toward the unending line of cars going bumper to bumper down the famous Miracle Strip where motels and restaurants seemed to Madeline like links of a long, colorfully lighted chain.

“I’ll guarantee it’s faster than riding,” she agreed. “Oh, how lovely!” she exclaimed over a large red flower in a bed near the curb. “What is it?”

“Hibiscus,” he told her. “They grow wild in the islands.”

“Lucky islanders,” she murmured.

He caught her hand and locked her fingers with his

as they strolled down the side of the road behind several straggling couples. The slight warm pressure made her tingle. She felt vaguely like a teenager on her first real date, glancing up at the big, tall, very handsome man by her side.

“I hope you like Polynesian food,” he said, nodding toward two giant tikis and several torches in front of a building constructed to resemble a grass hut.

“I’ve never eaten it, but I like most kinds of food.”

“So do I.”

“Why did you bring me to Panama City?” she asked suddenly.

He shrugged. “Impulse. I wanted to get away for a while, and I didn’t want to go alone.” He squeezed her hand. “Burgundy, I don’t spend much time on self-analysis. I do what pleases me.”

“Anyway,” she said, “thank you. I can’t remember ever enjoying anything so much. And you are going to let me reimburse you,” she added flatly, daring him to argue.

His narrow eyes sparkled. “We’ll discuss the price of the trip later,” he said, adding softly, “in private.”

Just a careless statement—but enough to freeze her blood and spoil the lovely meal and the lure of the graceful dancing and music. All through it, she was glancing toward the big man warily, wondering what

kind of payment he had in mind. After all, she hardly knew him, and God only knew what had possessed her to come with him. What would she do if he. . . .

“Ready to go?” he asked as he set down his coffee cup. “Oh!” She almost started at the suddenness of the question. “Oh, yes, of course.”

There was a hunted look about her that caught his eye, and he frowned. “What’s wrong?” he asked point-blank.

“Nothing,” she replied quickly. “I was just thinking.”

He didn’t say anything, and they returned to the hotel in silence. They rode up the elevator and paused in front of Madeline’s room.

“I’ll . . . I’ll say good night,” she murmured, jamming the key into the lock and opening the door. “Thanks again.”

“The hell you do,” he muttered, shouldering his way in before she could close the door. He locked it and turned back to her, ignoring the horror in her face, the sudden trembling of her body as he reached down and swung her up into his hard arms.

“Cal . . . ,” she whispered shakily.

“Isn’t this what you were expecting?” he growled, his eyes narrow and blazing like silver fires in his dark face as he stared toward the bedroom. “Little Miss

Independence, hell bent on paying her own way, every damned inch of the way. All right you can pay me, Burgundy—but in my own coin.”

He carried her into the bedroom and stood holding her beside the big, wide bed, searching her eyes with a merciless scrutiny. Her face had gone white, and her mouth was trembling. A fine mist blanketed her soft, dark eyes and threatened to make a flood down the taut cheeks.

The sight of her drawn, frightened face seemed to shake him. His heavy, dark brows drew together in the heady silence.

“There’s never been a man, has there, honey?” he asked in a deep whisper and didn’t seem surprised when she shook her head. “I think I knew all along—but I had to be sure . . . damn you, woman!” he whispered hotly, dumping her unceremoniously onto the bed like a sack of heavy potatoes. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

Her unsteady lower lip pouted as she glared up at him tearfully, “I . . . told you I’d never . . . never had a lover!” she shot back.

“Women lie like hell most of the time, why should I have believed you?” he growled, hands jammed deep into the pockets of his slacks as he studied her slender body. “My God, what did you think I wanted to stay

overnight for! A Polynesian dinner I could have had in Atlanta!”

Tears started rolling down her cheeks. “Please go,” she said in an utterly defeated tone, her eyes closed tightly. He was just like all the rest of them, except Phillip, just out for good times any way he could get them. Without an ounce of feeling or compassion. There was nothing in him but lust, and she wanted to hate him, but she was too drained.

“You can’t have been that naive,” he persisted.

“Is this what you meant when you said I needed someone?” she asked quietly, her eyes downcast. “Someone to just take me to bed and that would make everything all right? You said you had enough women, that we could be friends. And then you have the nerve to lie.” She stared up at him accusingly. “Please leave my room. I’ll get back to Atlanta on my own, if I have to walk every step of the way.”

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Is it my age?” he asked harshly.

“I don’t sleep with men!” she cried. “And no, it’s not your age! For heaven’s sake, you make yourself sound like Methuselah!”

The hard lines on his face seemed to soften. “Well, by God, there’s a woman under all that ice,” he murmured.

“Go away,” she grumbled.

He drew a deep, wistful breath. “It’s usually the other way around,” he mused, with a wicked look in his eyes.

She stiffened. “Well, I’m not one of your women!”

He smiled gently. “Pax, little one. I’m not quite as inhuman as you seem to think I am. Trust takes time, didn’t you know?”

“Don’t expect me to ever trust you again,” she grumbled.

“Burgundy.”

She looked up, and the anger left her. “Yes?”

“I do, so desperately, need one friend,” he said, and there was sincerity in the deep voice this time, an aching loneliness flickering for an instant in his eyes.

Tears poured down her cheeks. “So do I,” she admitted, forcing the words out.

He reached down a big hand and touched the tears, wiping them gently away. “We’ll start over, right now,” he told her quietly. “I’ll stop trying to seduce you, and we’ll just be friends, if that’s how you really want it. Okay?”

She forced a smile to her lips. “Okay, Cal.”

He took her hand and raised it to his warm, hard mouth. “I’ve never known anyone like you,” he said strangely. “Without question, you’ll be the first woman

‘friend’ I’ve ever had.”

She sniffed. “That sounds unique. Do I get a medal or something?”

“A free ride home,” he said tongue in cheek.

“Oh, get out of here and let me sleep!” She laughed.

He paused at the doorway, looking back at her curiously. “This afternoon, on the beach . . .” he began absently.

She reddened. “I’ll see you in the morning,” she told him.

His eyes ran the length of her slender body. “Sleep well,” he said tautly. “God knows I won’t.”

And with that remark, he went out the door.

CHAPTER 4

That trip turned out to be a milestone in their relationship, and things changed considerably after it. Cal never again treated her in any way other than that of affectionate comradeship. There were no more attempts at seduction, no overnight trips. He took her out occasionally. More often, he'd join her for an evening of television or challenge her to a swim in the pool next door, which had finally been completed. She found him to be a man of many moods, never the same man twice. One day he'd prick her temper and laugh at the explosion, the next he'd clam up and not talk. Once he called up and asked her if she wanted to go on a picnic.

After their picnic lunch she looked at him, as he was sprawled out on the grass behind the house on the banks of the little stream, his head resting on his arms as he stared up into the sunlit patches of leaves.

“I like the way you fry chicken,” he murmured lazily.

She smiled, remembering how she’d had to hurry to fry it this lazy Saturday morning when she’d planned on sleeping late. “Thank you.”

“But the potato salad needed more salt and less pickles.”

“Picky!” she chided.

“Me?”

“You! All over the world men are eating potato salad and enjoying it.”

“Not,” he replied, “if it has too many pickles and not enough salt.”

She brushed a strand of auburn hair out of her eyes. “Cal Forrest, there are times when I could just hit you!”

He opened one eye. “Try it,” he suggested in a soft tone. “Just once, try it.”

She shook her hair. “I could if I wanted to. I just don’t feel like exerting myself right now.”

He grinned. “Coward.”

“Want a slice of chocolate cake?” she asked.

“Make it two. I’m still growing,” he added with a wisp of a smile.

“If you grow much more, you’ll have to have your cars custom-made,” she remarked.

“Honey, my cars *are* custom-made, the Mercedes

notwithstanding,” he said gently.

She concentrated on slicing the cake. “Sorry.” He could be well-to-do. He had afforded to rent an airplane and flew off to Panama City on the spur of the moment. But she took that remark with a grain of salt, because it was an old Mercedes, and several of his shirts were worn, even if only slightly. Not that it mattered, she thought with amusement, but if he needed that kind of morale boost, she wasn’t about to deny it to him. He was far too nice—when he wasn’t criticizing her cooking.

Friday night she didn’t hear from him, and thinking it might be time for another apple pie, she baked one and took it across to him.

She didn’t notice the low-slung burgundy sports car until she was at the door, and then it was too late. She heard voices, and soft music, and waited apprehensively at the door after she rang the bell. She’d spent so much time with Cal lately she’d forgotten that he must have other friends, and she was aware of a nagging uneasiness about this visit.

He opened the door and his eyes seemed to explode as he saw her there.

“I brought you a pie,” she said in a choked whisper, holding it out even as she caught the first glimpse of the seductive brunette in the background. “Sorry, I didn’t

see that you had company until it was too late. I hope it tastes okay. I was on my way out and it was a last minute effort,” she added with a forced laugh.

Behind Cal, the brunette was hiding her laughter behind a tall glass of amber liquid and ice.

Cal stiffened as he took the pie. “Burgundy . . .” he began deeply.

“I’ve got to run,” she laughed, forcing herself to be gay. “Good night!”

She turned and ran for the hedge, and before she reached the back door, her face was wet with tears. She went inside, brushing past Cabbage, grabbed her purse and locked the door behind her. She got in the car and seconds later pulled out into the street, resolutely keeping her eyes away from the house next door.

“That’s what you get, you stupid woman,” she told herself through a stream of tears. “What did you think he meant when he told you he had women? That he wrote to pen pals? Stupid!”

She drove to the nearby mall and parked the car in a crowded section near the stores, locking both doors, and she sat there and cried until her throat hurt. The man didn’t belong to her, for heaven’s sake! He was just a friend, that was all. But, that slinky brunette. . . .

Finally, with a red nose and swollen eyelids, she got out of the car and made her way to the nearby theater.

She was thirty minutes too early for the film, so she bought her ticket and sat on one of the wide benches against the wall of the carpeted area to wait.

She closed her eyes, but Cal was behind them, Cal and the brunette, and she opened them again because she couldn't bear it. If only she'd fooled him. It wouldn't do to let him know how much seeing him with another woman had affected her. He might think she had some dumb reason for it—like being in love with him. Shards of white-hot metal pierced her heart. In love! Never, not again, not that, not Cal!

She shook herself. People simply didn't fall in love with each other this quickly, not in a few weeks. She drew a deep breath. It was the loneliness, and suddenly having someone to share it and lessen it, that was all. Naturally she felt offended when someone came between her and Cal—he was her friend.

The puzzle got worse the more she thought about it. She didn't want to think about it anyway. He wasn't the only man in the world. There were lots of other men. She looked around the room at some of them. They were all with women—couples. The world went around in pairs, and singles had all the gaiety of dinosaurs. Why had she come to this dumb theater anyway when it only emphasized her aloneness?

But the picture was about to start. It was a chilling

horror show, and that was what she needed to get her mind off Cal. So she bought a bag of popcorn, sat stuffed in between two sets of necking teenagers, and watched the creature eat the crew of the spaceship. They all, for some reason, had dark wavy hair and gray eyes.

It was after midnight when she ran out of places to sit and drink coffee, so she went home in defeat. He'd be in bed now, anyway, she thought, and felt the tears running down her cheeks as she remembered the brunette.

She parked the car and got out, her head bent with an emotional exhaustion she hadn't felt in a long time. She put the key in the lock and started to turn it when she heard familiar footsteps.

"Burgundy," he said from somewhere over her left shoulder, but she didn't look at him.

"Oh, hello," she said brightly. "I went to see that new movie, you know, the one about the spaceship. . . ."

"Knock it off," he growled. "I know damned good and well you weren't in that kind of hurry to see some movie!"

"I was, actually," she replied calmly. "I hope the pie was all right, I didn't mean to interrupt. . . ."

"Oh, God, what are you trying to do to me?" he

asked in a husky whisper, moving closer.

She looked up, and heard him draw a sharp breath as he saw the tears. The next minute he caught and crushed her body against his.

"You damned little scalded cat," he whispered at her ear, "why did you have to look at me like that, as if I'd dumped boiling water over your head? I damned well told you I was no monk. Didn't you hear me?"

Her cheek moved restlessly against his hard, warm chest, as it rose and fell and pounded comfortingly against her ear. "I'm sorry," she whispered, choking on the words. "I didn't see the car, honest I didn't, or I'd. . ."

"I know!" he said curtly. "That's what hurt the most. I could taste the embarrassment. You wore it like perfume! Don't you think I know you'd never interfere in my life? I could beat the breath out of that sweet young body!"

His arms tightened as if to emphasize the point, and she gasped in pain. "You're crushing me," she whispered.

"You make me want to hurt you, little girl," he growled, catching her long hair to tug her face up to his blazing eyes. "I've been half out of my mind wondering where you were. Did you know that?"

She lowered her swollen eyes, "I can look out for

myself. I've had lots of practice."

His hands contracted and hurt her. "Don't, honey," he said in a barely audible threat. "Don't push me one step further, or you're going to see a side of me that may shock that prim little mind."

In the silence that followed, some mischievous imp dared her to push him that one inch further, to test him, to find out . . . frightened of her own thoughts, she pressed gently against his shirt.

"I'm so tired, Cal," she murmured.

"Feverish, too, unless I miss my guess," he growled, feeling her forehead. "You look like hell."

"I like you, too," she replied.

"Impudent brat." He let her go. "Go to bed and take a couple of aspirin. And from now on, I'll hang a white handkerchief over the gate in the hedge if I'm occupied. Fair enough?"

"It isn't necessary," she replied proudly. "I won't come again unless I'm invited. I don't like imposing. . . ."

"Oh, God, you're asking for it," he said in a voice unlike anything she'd ever heard. "Go inside. Quick, damn it!"

* * *

She took one look at his face and went in the door

without another word.

Her throat felt worse than ever as she crawled into bed and turned out the light. The room, in the darkness, seemed to spin around and around. If only it weren't so hot....

When she woke up the next morning, she couldn't even raise her head, and her throat felt like an oven. She tried to speak and found that she couldn't. There were aspirins on the bedside table and half a glass of water. She took the tablets and swallowed them down, leaning back exhausted against the pillows. It would have been funny if it weren't so frightening. She couldn't get to a phone to call for help, and it looked as if her rations for the rest of the weekend were going to be aspirins and less than a half a glass of water. Tears of sick frustration ran down her cheeks. Even Cal wouldn't come looking for her now, not after last night.

She buried her face in the cool pillow and cried like a baby. She was alone in the world, and everybody who could have cared about her wouldn't, and she hoped they'd all come to her funeral and hate themselves—they being Cal. She hoped he wouldn't bring the brunette. That would ruin it all.

By the end of the day she could feel the fever beginning to climb dangerously, but there was nothing she could do to get it down. The aspirin bottle was

empty, and there were only a couple of teaspoons full of water left in the glass. With a muffled groan, she closed her eyes and drifted away. . . .

She was floating, and it was hot, so very hot. She kept asking why it was so hot, but no one would answer her. Then she was in a cool mountain stream, feeling the water wash over her body like wet silk, cooling, cooling, washing her parched lips, her dry face and hands. It was the most beautiful feeling, like a caress, like a tender caress as it bathed her all over in its coolness.

A sound, something, woke her. Her eyes opened drowsily, and she saw Cal sitting in a chair by her bed. His face was shadowed with a faint growth of beard, his hair rumpled as if by restless fingers. His clothes were rumpled, too, as if he'd slept in them.

"What are you . . . doing here?" she croaked.

He raised an eyebrow and lifted a glass of water from the bedside table. Moving to sit beside her on the bed, he lifted her head in one big hand and gave her a sip of the cool, clear liquid. It tasted like heaven to her parched mouth.

"How delicious," she whispered with a wan smile.

"I thought it would be." He put the glass down and studied her through bloodshot eyes. "Feel any better?"

She moved under the covers and suddenly

discovered something. She wasn't wearing a nightgown—or anything else. Defensively, her fingers clutched the sheet and she looked at him with the question in her wide eyes, her flushed face.

“You were running a temperature of 104,” he said quietly. “I couldn't get in touch with the doctor, and I had to get it down quick. It was the only way.”

“I see,” she whispered.

“God, you're lovely, woman,” he said with something like reverence in his tone. He stood up, ignoring her blazing embarrassment, and went to the window. “I finally got in touch with my doctor and described your symptoms. He said it's probably flu and called in a prescription to the drugstore for some antibiotics. I'm going to pump you full of them for the next three days, and if you're not better by then, you're going to his office.”

“Three days?” she gasped. “But, I can't, I've got to go to work, I'm . . . !”

He came back to the bedside and leaned down, his big hands making deep impressions in the pillow on either side of her head as he looked straight into her eyes. “Three days, madam. Precisely three days, if I have to climb into that bed with you and hold you down.”

She averted her eyes. “All right. But how can I call

Mr. Richards like this?" she said in a rusty whisper. "I already have. You're officially on sick leave and some girl named Brenda's taking over for you."

"Oh, poor Brenda," she rasped. "She and Mr. Richards will kill each other."

"That's none of your concern. Just get well and stop trying to carry the world on your shoulders," he told her. "I'm going to run down to the drugstore and fetch your medicine. What would you like to drink or eat?"

"Tomato juice," she said instantly. "And chicken noodle soup!"

He smiled down at her. "And . . . ?"

"That's all any sick person needs. Tomato juice and. . . ."

" . . . chicken noodle soup. If you say so, honey," he said with a smile.

She reached up a weak hand and touched his rough cheek gently. "Cal, you didn't have to do this. . . ."

"Yes, I did." He reached down and pushed the damp hair away from her temples tenderly. "I can't let anything happen to you, Burgundy. In some strange way, you make life bearable for me. I'm not going to lose you."

There was something threatening in the way he said it, in the possessive way he was looking at her flushed

face, her soft mouth. Big and dark and arrogant, he seemed to be taking over her life, and she wasn't at all sure that she wanted to stop him.

One long, brown finger traced the soft line of her mouth. "No comeback?" he asked in a soft, deep tone.

She gazed up at him helplessly, staggered by the statement.

He smiled. "Go to sleep, little girl. I'll be back as soon as I can." He went out the door, leaving her quiet and thoughtful in the big bed.

The soup was every bit as good as she'd anticipated it would be. Sitting propped up in bed, in the prim cotton gown she'd thrown on while Cal was gone, she thought nothing had ever tasted so wonderful.

"You and your chicken soup," he murmured, shaking his head. "Why do women think it's the universal cure? Even my wife, as sensible as she was, always brought me chicken soup at the first sneeze."

Wife. One word, to bring the stars and moon crashing down on her head, to make her ache with a kind of grief that was almost like a death. Wife. She closed her eyes on the pain.

"I . . . I didn't know you were married," she said, concentrating on getting the spoonful of soup to her mouth.

"I'm a widower," he said, and she felt his eyes

watching her closely. "My wife is dead, Burgundy."

"Oh," she murmured inadequately, hating the relief she felt, hating herself for the pleasure. . . .

"It was a long time ago," he said. "Not what you'd call a love match, but I was fond of her, and we'd lived together long enough that I missed her. Poor Jen, she was in love with another man, and he was married too. Funny thing," he added quietly. "He didn't outlive her by a month. Heart attack they said, but I think he grieved himself to death. Can you believe that?" he laughed bitterly. "I can't conceive of a man caring that much about any woman."

"No, you couldn't, you insensitive brute," she teased, but the laughter didn't go deeper than her lips.

"Insult my character again, and I won't bring you any more soup," he threatened.

"Some soup!" she scoffed. "You didn't even put butter in it."

"Listen, lady, the only butter you keep has a crumpled wrapper and what looks like fingerprints in it. I'm not putting that in any fresh soup," he countered.

"Don't insult the way I keep butter," she said.

"Would you like me to show you the proper way to do it?"

She smiled wickedly and drew back the half-full soup bowl. "Want some?" she asked sweetly.

“Do it and die, baby,” he challenged. “If you’re sure you want to waste it.”

She wasn’t, and she didn’t.

* * *

Two days later, she was back on her feet and at work, despite some forceful protests from Cal, who maintained that she was too weak. Her first day back on the job almost proved him right. She had lunch with Brenda in a small restaurant near the office and could tolerate only a small salad.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Brenda asked sympathetically. “You look terrible.”

“I feel terrible. Cal was right, I guess,” she sighed. “It may be a little too soon, but I’ll make it.”

“I wanted to come see about you, but your friend said you didn’t need any visitors tiring you,” she laughed. “Gosh, he’s a tiger, isn’t he? I didn’t dare argue with him.”

“A bulldozer,” Madeline countered. Her eyes went soft. “A very nice bulldozer.”

“I thought he was old and ugly and ran over people?”

Madeline shifted uncomfortably. “Well, he does run over people. But,” she added with a tiny smile, “he’s very attractive.”

“Oh, my goodness! Am I hearing right? Madeline Blainn noticing an attractive man?” Brenda said in mock astonishment.

“Cut it out. I can look, can’t I?”

“Honey, you can look and touch for all I care, I think it’s wonderful!”

Madeline looked down at her salad. She thought it was wonderful, too—but platonic. She’d wanted it that way after all, and Cal had seen to it that things stayed strictly nonphysical. But . . . did she really want that?

That first day tired her out more than she realized. She had an early night and went to sleep almost immediately. But she seemed to have hardly closed her eyes when the sound of breaking ceramics crashed into the blissful silence, and woke her out of a sound sleep.

Without thinking, she bounded out of bed and grabbed her robe, whipping her arms into it as she opened her bedroom door and peered down the hall toward the source of the noise. There wasn’t another sound, and she tiptoed cautiously in the darkness going to the doorway that opened into the living room.

She still didn’t hear anything, although her heart was beating like a trip hammer. Quickly, she reached for the light switch and hit it, silently praying it wouldn’t disclose a burly burglar.

Light flared into the room, and it didn’t take two

seconds for her to piece together the mystery. The flower vase had been knocked off the mantel, where it crashed into a larger vase holding dried flowers, and finally rested in shards of broken pottery all over the carpet.

Sultana, alias Cabbage, was just emerging with wild, dilated eyes from behind a chair.

“Clumsy!” Madeline exclaimed on a sigh of relief. “Oh, you extraordinary animal!”

Cabbage let out a squall of protest and didn’t quiet until her mistress picked her up and stroked her.

“Come on, and I’ll pour you some milk,” Madeline laughed. “I could use a cup of coffee myself. Oh, you dumb animal, you!”

Her nerves were still screaming from the mishap, even though she knew she was safe now. With a shaky sigh, she poured the cat a bowl of milk and started a pot of coffee perking. She wondered how in the world she’d ever wake up on time in the morning.

“And how can I blame it on you?” she asked the nonchalant Siamese. “I can see me now, telling Mr. Richards I’m bleary-eyed because my cat likes to play volleyball with vases at one o’clock in the morning!”

A sudden, hard knock on the back door froze her. Shivering, she managed to turn her head in that general direction, starting when she saw the big, shadowy figure

silhouetted against the glass.

A burglar, a real one! Desperately, she looked around the kitchen for something, anything, she could use for a weapon, and the sound came again, louder, making her jump.

“Burgundy!” came a familiar voice along with the banging.

With a sharp, audible sigh, she ran to the back door, flicking on the carport light as she opened the chain latch. Cal stood on the doorstep, his hair rumpled, his clothes thrown on, his shirt half unbuttoned, his eyes dark and bloodshot.

“I thought you were a burglar!” she exclaimed.

He scowled at her disdainfully as he walked past her into the kitchen and riffled through the cabinet for a coffee mug. “Would a burglar knock, for God’s sake?”

She closed the door again and leaned back against it with a wistful smile. “I guess not, but some burglars are pretty weird, and you never know, do you?”

He threw her a glance as he poured himself a cup of the freshly perked coffee. “With you, no.” He drew out a chair and sank into it wearily. “I was almost asleep when I heard a crash and saw your lights come on. God, I think I set a new land-speed record for fast changing! What happened?”

She shrugged, pouring her own cup of coffee.

“Cabbage knocked a vase off the mantle, and it hit another vase on the floor. Pity she lived,” she added maliciously, with a glance at the cat, now wrapped lovingly around Cal’s ankle.

He shook his head and ran a big hand through his rumpled dark hair. “That’s why I keep a dog,” he said. “They can’t get on mantels.”

“They bark,” she returned as she sat down beside him at the breakfast bar.

“Suleiman doesn’t.”

“Suleiman,” she reminded him, “isn’t a dog. He’s a horse.”

“That isn’t what his papers say.”

“What do the kennel club people know?” she returned. “He never sat on any of them!”

A wisp of a smile touched his hard face, lined and taut with lack of sleep, every year of his age showing suddenly, relentlessly.

“Cal, you look so tired,” she said gently.

He ran a big hand over his eyes. “I am. I had a tangle to straighten out tonight, and I had to do it by overseas telephone. God, it’s frustrating!”

“A tangle?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I thought you knew I was in business. Construction, to be precise. That’s how I know your boss.”

“Oh, yes,” she smiled into her coffee cup. “Evenly Fried McCallum. I wonder what he’d do to me if I ever called him that?”

“Probably have you skinned alive, if I know the old barbarian.” His eyes studied her oval face. “What’s it like, working for him?”

“I don’t know since he’s never there.” She sighed. “But Mr. Richards can be such a pain. Poor man, I think his wife must beat him, and he takes it out on the rest of us. I get along, but he gives Brenda an awful time. She can’t do anything to please him.”

“Oh, I see. One of those,” he added with a sharp inflection.

“He’s not quite as bad as one of the vice presidents,” she said. “Mr. James comes over every other day to have us run errands for him, since Mr. Richards had his secretary fired. We’re now doing our own work and the public relations’ correspondence as well. ‘We’ being the staff in McCallum’s executive suite of offices. We feel like little lost sheep sometimes. The shepherd’s too busy off shacking up with his women to care about what goes on in his business,” she sighed.

“He keeps women?” Cal teased.

“He has them coming out the windows, from what we hear!”

“My goodness, for an old man he must be in

fantastic shape.”

“Well, almost.” She stared down at her cup. “He’s not well; you know that, I guess. They say he’s grieving himself to death, and the doctors are making him take a vacation before he burns himself out.”

“My God, isn’t gossip fascinating?” he said, leaning forward on his elbows to watch her intently. “Tell me more. What’s he grieving about?”

“The plane crash. . . .”

“Grieving won’t bring back the dead, honey, and I’m sure McCallum knows it,” he told her quietly. “I think you’re taking office rumors a little too seriously. McCallum’s not on his deathbed by a long shot, and you can take that as gospel. I spoke to him less than an hour ago, and he’s no more decayed than I am. Speaking of health,” he added pointedly, “how’s yours, you stubborn little red-headed mule?”

“I am not red-headed,” she replied. “And I did just fine. No problems—until tonight when my cat decided to have a party, that is.”

He shook his head. “Well, the coffee’s good, anyway.”

“Thank you. Want a slice of cake?”

He shook his head. “I’ve got to grab a few hours sleep. I’m flying over to Dallas in the morning for a conference. I’ll probably be gone three or four days, so

try to stay out of trouble while I'm away, okay? And don't get sick?"

She smiled gently. "I'll do my best. You, too."

He winked at her, leaving the cup on the table as he rose. "Be seeing you."

"Sure."

He left her sitting there, and the house lost all its color and became an empty shell.

CHAPTER 5

She was awakened the next morning by a screaming telephone. She jerked it to her ear and mumbled a response.

“Well, sweet cousin, how are you?” came a pleasant male voice over the receiver.

“Horace! How are you?” She laughed sleepily.

“Hopeful. What’s this I hear about you and a man?”

“Wishful thinking, only a new neighbor. Have you been talking to Brenda again?” she teased.

“Listening, was more like it. Say, I thought I’d come down for a visit in a week or so. Got enough room?”

“You know you’re always welcome—even if we are at odds about the house,” she added gently.

“Thanks, cuz, I think you’re pretty swell, too, but this is the smallest apartment and twenty miles from my job. . . .”

“Now, Horace....”

“I know,” he sighed. “Horace, shut up. Okay. By the way, Mom and Dad send their love and want to know when you’re coming up for that vacation?”

“Oh, I’m not sure,” she said, horrified at just the thought of being that far away from Cal even for a week. “Someday.”

“That’s what you always say. Oh, well, Brenda got my hopes up, and I just thought I’d check. No offense,” he said, and she could picture the boyish grin on his thin face.

She smiled, shaking her head. “No offense, cousin. Bye.”

* * *

Cal’s four days turned into a week, and never had Madeline felt more alone. She kept watching the house over the hedge with her eyes that grew sadder by the day. She couldn’t eat. She couldn’t sleep. Even on the job, she was more and more depressed and irritable. The waiting, the wanting, were incredibly hard. It was ridiculous, she kept telling herself, to get so emotionally involved with a man that she almost stopped breathing when he wasn’t around. But that didn’t ease the persistent ache to see his dark face, to hear the deep, slow voice. Where was he all this time, what was he

doing, what kind of business was keeping him away so long? Until the night before he left, he'd told her nothing about his work. For all their wanderings together, he was still very much a stranger in some respects.

There was a story about a light plane crash on the news, and she had visions of Cal lying torn up in some forest, and nobody knowing. It haunted her, that picture. If there'd been any way she could have called, anonymously, to find out if he was all right, she'd have done it. After that, she barely slept at all.

It was Thursday, and raining, and she was curled up in front of the television late that evening in her silky blue caftan, reading while she listened to a game show, when the door bell rang.

Half expecting cousin Horace, she opened the door without thinking and froze, her heart brimming over, her lips slightly parting in mute astonishment.

Cal looked unusually tired. His face was heavily lined and drawn, his eyes bloodshot, as if he hadn't slept at all. He needed a light shave, and his tie was off, his shirt open wide at the throat—and he was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. The light came back into her world, full of warm colors and soft delight.

She bit back tears. "You look terrible," she whispered unsteadily.

"So do you," he replied, noting the wan little face,

the shadows under her eyes.

“You were gone a long time.”

“What I went for took a long time.”

They stared at each other, the door wide open, the sound of the rain filling the darkness outside, a pleasant, pelting thudding sound that made the house seem cozy and safe.

“Oh, God, come here,” he whispered huskily, and held out his arms.

She went into them as if she'd been lost in the woods for days and was finally home, her arms stretching up around his neck, her face buried in the soft silk shirt, her body trembling as he pressed it hungrily against his own.

He sighed deeply, slowly. “Next time, you're coming with me,” he murmured. “I'm not going through this again.”

“You didn't miss me,” she teased tearfully. “I'll bet you had women following you everywhere.”

His big arms contracted slowly, with an aching need, pressing her relentlessly closer to that powerful, husky body. A tremor ran through her at the almost intimate contact, closer than she'd ever been to a man.

“The only woman I want to follow me wouldn't,” he replied in an odd, husky voice.

The brunette, of course, she thought miserably and

with a tired sigh.

He felt her withdrawal, as if he could see into her mind, and silently loosened his hold so that she could step back.

“I could sure use a cup of coffee,” he said tightly.

She forced a smile. “I just happen to have one.”

He sat down at the kitchen breakfast bar and smoked a cigarette while he waited for her to pour the coffee, his dark eyes never leaving her for an instant.

She darted an occasional glance his way, puzzled by the intensity of the gaze, the dark, inscrutable look in his eyes.

“Have I done something to make you angry?” she asked finally when she’d placed the coffee in front of him and was sitting beside him.

“No,” he said, as she watched him take a long draw from the cigarette.

There was a long silence, filled with the sound of rain crashing down on the bushes outside the window.

“Isn’t the rain lovely?” she asked finally, just for something to say. “It’s been so dry lately. My tomato plants were gasping.”

“Ummmm,” he murmured, his eyes blank as they stared into the thick black liquid in his mug.

“You’re dead on your feet, aren’t you?” she asked softly.

“Worse than that.” He finished off the coffee and set the mug down. “I haven’t slept in forty-eight hours.”

“Cal! What are you trying to do, kill yourself?” she burst out.

He lifted an eyebrow at the concern in her voice. “Why, Miss Blainn, you’ll make me conceited. I might think you care.”

She blushed furiously and averted her eyes. “You’re my friend,” she whispered. “Of course I care!”

He stood, and she felt his eyes on her bent head. “How about dinner tomorrow night?”

She glanced up at him with a smile. “I’d like that.”

“I’ll pick you up at six.”

“All right.”

He leaned over and ruffled her hair. “I missed you, Burgundy,” he said gently.

She looked up with warmth overflowing in her eyes. “I missed you, too,” she whispered.

His eyes narrowed, glittering. They dropped to her mouth and lingered there like a slow, lazy caress, bringing her heart into her throat, making her pulse run wild. “You make me feel my age sometimes, little girl,” he murmured deeply.

“You’re not old, Cal,” she said softly.

There was a brief pause, and she heard him move. Suddenly he was kneeling beside her chair, his height

making his head level with hers.

His big hand went to her throat, his fingers caressing and slow and warm. “Why did you freeze on me earlier, when I was holding you?” he asked, his eyes looking deep into hers.

She could barely get her breath, the nearness of his big body worked on her nerves so. “I—I didn’t realize I had,” she lied unsteadily.

“Liar,” he whispered, and his face moved toward hers, dark, solemn and relentless.

She stiffened involuntarily in anticipation, feeling his breath, warm and smoky, whipping across her lips as his mouth touched hers for the first time. She felt a surge of warmth explode inside her at the contact, a starburst of sensation that was new and a little frightening. His mouth was warm and exquisitely gentle at first, giving her time to adjust to the change in their relationship. But then, just as she began to relax, to let that powerful hand at her neck coax her face closer, his mouth began to open on hers, forcing her lips apart in an intimacy she’d never experienced before. She struggled quickly free and sat there staring at him blankly, her eyes dark and wide and her mouth softly trembling.

He watched her, his face impassive, but there was an expression in his eyes that shook her. “Little innocent,”

he said quietly, and it sounded strangely like an endearment.

She dropped her eyes in embarrassment. "I can't help being stupid about things," she muttered.

"Not stupid, Burgundy. Untutored." He stood up and ran a restless hand through her hair. "Don't lose any sleep over it."

She glanced up at him. "What shall I wear tomorrow night?"

"A dress, honey, I think I feel like celebrating," he chuckled. "Good night, little one."

"Good night."

She wanted to call him back, to tell him there was so much she didn't know, to ask him to teach her . . . He turned at the doorway and saw the look on her face, and a slow, deep smile touched the hard features. With a wink, he was gone.

After work the next day, she went to one of the malls and found a dress suitable for a special occasion, a slinky black creation with a tiny red rose at the neckline. It was really more than she could afford, but the thought of Cal's eyes when he saw her in it compensated.

His reaction was everything she'd hoped for. He stood in the doorway, and his dark, bold eyes sketched every soft curve of her body in a silence alive with

tension.

“Honey, that’s not the dress to wear if you want to keep this relationship platonic,” he said meaningfully.

She blushed. “This old thing?” she teased. “Why, Mist’ Rhett, it was one of the curtains in my drawing room until lately!”

“You impudent little cat,” he returned. “Well, are you coming or not?”

She threw a lacy black shawl around her shoulders, idly gazing at the picture he made in his dark evening clothes as she joined him.

* * *

He took her to one of the best downtown restaurants, a quietly plush place where red candles were used instead of overhead lighting and the wine list was the best in town.

She studied the menu silently and made her choices, still warily considering his pocket, and he gave the order for them both.

He eyed her over his coffee cup just before the first course was served, his lips set, his eyes vaguely annoyed. “Why,” he asked, “do you always order the cheapest damned thing on the menu?”

She reddened. “I . . . I like chicken,” she said in a weak defense.

He set his cup carefully back in its saucer. "I can afford a steak," he told her patiently. "If I couldn't, I wouldn't have brought you here in the first place. I'd have taken you out for a hamburger and fries instead."

Embarrassed, she stared down at her plate. "I don't want you to go without just to give me a fancy meal," she said in a small voice. "I'm not fussy, and I don't expect champagne and caviar on an evening out. I'm really more of a burger-and-fries person."

His big hand came across the table to cover hers warmly, gently. "I know that," he said in a strange, deep tone. "Let me spoil you a little, Burgundy. I think you need it."

She flushed even redder. "Don't...."

His fingers closed around hers tightly. "Say, 'yes. Cal.'"

She swallowed nervously, and peeked up at him. A smile made her dark eyes sparkle against her peaches-and-cream complexion. "Yes, Cal," she repeated softly.

His eyes dropped to her smiling lips. "I'd rather have your mouth than anything on the menu," he said deeply.

"Cal!" she gasped.

"You gave it to me last night—at first, anyway," he teased wickedly.

She dropped her eyes to the white linen tablecloth.

“No fair,” she protested weakly.

“I love the way you blush, little girl,” he told her, leaning back in his chair like a dark conqueror, his eyes missing nothing. “After tonight, you’re going to do less of it, though.”

Her eyes looked up, a question in them.

“I did mention that you were untutored,” he said softly. “Don’t you think it’s time someone taught you the basics, Burgundy?”

She shifted restlessly. “And you think it ought to be you?”

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully, his face dark and quiet and solemn. “Don’t you, Burgundy?”

“I thought we agreed to keep it platonic . . . ?”

His fingers toyed with the handle of his cup as he sought her eyes and held them across the table. “Don’t panic. I’m not offering you an affair.”

“Then what . . . ?”

He raised an eyebrow as the waiter brought the first course. “We’ll talk about it later. Now, that’s what I call a steak,” he praised the slab of perfectly cooked meat. His eyes went distastefully to her chicken and mushrooms. “I hope you have nightmares,” he said unkindly.

She ignored him, daintily placed her napkin in her lap. “You don’t know what you’re missing,” she replied

saucily, and began to eat.

“God help me, I do.”

* * *

They stopped by the airport on the way home to sit and watch the planes take off and land, their lights bright against the night sky.

Cal had a pocket receiver so they could listen to the transmissions. It didn't take a mind reader to know that airplanes occupied a large chunk of his life.

“You're crazy about them, aren't you?” she asked, gazing across the front seat at him.

“Planes?” He laughed. “I soloed when I was sixteen in a 1946 Aeronca Champion. I've been flying on and off ever since. There's something about piloting an aircraft that gets into your blood. It's been in mine as long as I can remember.”

“I used to like them, too.”

“Honey, just as many people die in automobile accidents,” he reminded her, “but we still drive cars. You can't crawl into a tomb with the dead, little girl.”

She studied her lap. “I know. It's just . . . I think I felt guilty, you see. I'd planned to go on that flight with him, but at the last minute I decided to join him a day later. If I'd gone. . . .”

“But you didn't. You lived.” He turned toward her,

one big arm thrown over the seat, leaning back against his door to study her. "I believe everything happens for a reason. We may not know what that reason is, but there's one thing sure as hell, and that's that we can't change fate. So why feel guilty about being alive? Would he have wanted that?"

She shook her head. "He was a very gentle man, a kind man. He wouldn't ever have wanted me to feel . . . but it hurt so," she whispered.

"Tell me about him."

She smiled, remembering. "Tall, slender, green-eyed, full of fun and life. Phillip was always laughing. He was in the public relations department of a company near ours, and I met him on my lunch hour in a restaurant. We only went together three months before we decided to get married. We'd barely had time to announce our engagement when it happened. I watched him buried on what would have been our wedding day."

He reached out a big hand and smoothed the hair at her temples. "Did you burn when he touched you?" he said in a tight, odd voice.

She blushed. "We . . . it wasn't like that . . ."

"It's going to be like that with us," he said quietly. "Here, hold this. It's time I took you home."

She took the receiver as he cranked the car and headed it out toward the highway, stunned by the

cryptic remarks.

* * *

Instead of taking her home, he pulled into his own driveway.

“Come on in,” he said, opening the door for her. “I’ll give you a non-alcoholic nightcap, and you can talk over old times with Suleiman.”

She laughed. “I don’t really feel like a swim tonight.”

“If he pushes you into anything wet, I’ll skin him and you can watch. Deal?”

“Deal.”

The dog met them at the door with a ferocious bark that turned almost immediately to a low murmur of pleasure.

“Hello, Puppy,” Madeline cooed, stroking his sleek black fur, “hello, boy.”

He lapped up the affection like a sponge sitting with his eyes closed and his tongue out while she petted him.

Cal poured himself a glass of what looked like whiskey and soda and fixed Madeline a tall glass of ginger ale. He handed it to her and paused to shed his jacket, tie and shoes. He stretched out on the sofa with a long, heartfelt sigh, eyeing her where she knelt on the thick beige carpet with the big dog.

“Your drink’s getting warm,” he remarked, sipping at his.

“Only you could call ginger ale a drink,” she teased. She rose and retrieved the glass from the coffee table by his side, just as he caught her wrist and eased her gently down to sit beside him on the sofa. She could feel the heat from his big, warm body against her hip and thigh where they touched. Looking down into that wide, swarthy face with his dark eyes boring into hers seemed to take her breath. He was vibrantly masculine in that white, loosened shirt, the dark curling hairs visible on his bronzed chest in the wide opening. Her eyes went to the hand curled around his glass, the dark, beautifully masculine hand with its square-tipped fingers and immaculate nails. Absently, she wondered what its touch would be like....

He reached out and caught her free hand in his, bringing it to his bare chest in what seemed like an idle, lazy move. He spread her fingers, laying her hand flat against him so that the curling hairs tickled her palm. The warmth of his chest scorched her fingers.

“Your hands are cold,” he said gently.

“F-from the glass,” she replied, sipping nervously at the ginger ale.

He took another swallow of his drink and put it back on the table. He took hers out of her nerveless

hand and put it away, too. His big hands caught her upper arms, drawing her down against his chest, gently, until her cheek was resting on his broad shoulder, her chest resting fully on his.

“Now, relax,” he said over her head, his hands caressing her back. “Kick your shoes off and put your feet up.”

She obeyed him without thinking, drugged by the closeness of his body, the tangy fragrance of his cologne.

Suleiman came up between the sofa and coffee table and nuzzled at Cal’s arm until he was banished with a sharp command.

“Jealous beast,” Cal chuckled, tightening his arms. “If he weren’t such a bargain of a guard dog...”

“Cal, why do you keep a guard dog?” she asked.

His chest rose and fell heavily against her. “I’ve needed one a time or two in my life, little girl. He’s handier than a gun, and there’s no way he can be used against me. Stop talking. You ask too many questions.”

She snuggled closer as he reached up and flicked on the radio, flooding the room with soft music.

“Is this how you treated that brunette?” she murmured against his shirt.

“Jealous, baby?”

“We’re friends,” she reminded him. “Friends aren’t

supposed to be jealous of each other.”

“So they say.” He moved, shifting so that she was lying full length on the wide sofa and he was leaning over her, propped on one elbow. His finger traced the soft curve of her mouth slowly, sensuously.

“Have you ever been on a fishing trip?” he asked suddenly.

“Not in years. My uncle and I used to go, though.” She smiled impishly. “I’m very good at drowning worms.”

“I’ve got some friends who live on a dairy farm near Columbus. I’m going down for the weekend. Want to come?”

She gazed up at him solemnly. “To fish?”

“If I wanted you,” he said bluntly, “I could have had you twenty times by now. There’s been plenty of opportunity. We both know that. I’m offering you a vacation, chaperoned, with a room of your own, good company, and good food. Take it or leave it.”

She flushed painfully and dropped her eyes to the massive dark chest above her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound . . . I’d like very much to go if you still want to take me with you.”

His fingers moved gently into the soft hair at her temple, coaxing her eyes up to his. “We’ll keep it platonic, if that’s what you want,” he growled. “God

knows it's true that I'm too damned old to set my sights on a child like you!"

"You're not too old, Cal," she whispered, stung by the tone. Involuntarily, her hand reached up to touch his face and froze as her mind registered the intimacy of such an action.

"What's the matter?" he asked, capturing the small hand to lay it gently against his hard, warm cheek. "Are you afraid to touch me?"

She cringed mentally at the tone. "It's not that. I . . . I don't know you very well. . . ."

"Not in a physical sense, you mean." He searched her eyes deeply, quietly, until the intensity of his gaze made her blood surge like a riptide. "That can be remedied very easily. Put your hands on me, little one. Like this." He drew her slender hands up and placed them against his hard chest, moving them over the bronzed muscles sensuously.

He bent, and she felt his mouth touch her forehead, her closed eyelids, her cheek, the corner of her soft mouth. His hands went under her back to press gently against her shoulder blades, lifting her body up against his.

He felt the involuntary rigidity of her slender body, and nuzzled his face into her throat. "Just relax, don't stiffen up on me, little innocent," he murmured

sensuously. “This is just an aperitif, not a five-course meal. I know precisely how far I can go without hurting either one of us.”

The feel of him against her was like a narcotic; she wanted more and more, she wanted to be closer. Her cheek moved restlessly against his temple, his cool, dark hair.

His mouth moved against her throat, up to her jaw, her chin, and finally, to brush against her mouth in a slow, whispery tasting that seemed to start a fire burning.

“Cal . . . ” she whispered unsteadily, being slowly driven mad by the persistent, lingering touch of his mouth that was relentlessly causing hers to part in anticipation. The hunger she was feeling was new and strange and shocking. She didn’t want to give in to it, but she couldn’t help herself.

“I won’t rush you, not in any way,” he murmured against her lips. “Easy, now, don’t fight me....”

Her cold fingers touched his cheek, and her eyes closed again. “Cal, I wanted this . . . ” she admitted on a sob.

“So did I, from the very beginning, but you weren’t ready then.”

“Kiss me,” she whispered brokenly, clinging to him unashamedly, “really kiss me . . . !”

His mouth went down against hers with a pressure that made her yield instinctively to an ardor like nothing she'd ever experienced. She let him fold her closer, pressing her slender body against the length of his, so close that she could feel the heavy slam of his heart as if it were beating in her own chest. The kiss burned into her blood, her soul, a tasting that brought a delight bordering on madness. Her fingers tangled in his thick, dark hair, and not once did she think, could she think, of the differences between them.

His big hand ran over the soft curves of her body, lingering against her hip, to turn and move softly, excitingly, back up to her shoulder. She trembled at the mastery in that caress, and he drew back, his eyes dark with triumph, and something less definable.

"Was it like this with him, Burgundy?" he whispered, his teeth nipping gently at her lip, "did you burn for him the way you're burning for me?"

He brought the memories back, hazy and far away, and she tried to remember how it had been when Phillip kissed her, but her mind, like her body, was in flames. "I don't remember," she whispered shakily.

He laughed softly, dangerously, as he bent his head. "Never mind, honey. Don't think," he bit off against her mouth, "just feel . . . !"

He took her mouth again, harder this time, rougher,

as if the yielding young body in his arms was making shreds of his willpower. "Kiss me back," he whispered huskily, "like this, Burgundy, like this . . . !"

She obeyed him weakly, following his lead, learning the first lessons of passion, feeling the instant response in the big, warm body her arms were wrapped around, dazed at the power she suddenly found in her trust.

With a hard groan, he drew back a breath. "Woman, I want you like hell on fire, and I'm not used to stopping. I think you'd better sit up and sip your ginger ale before I yield to my baser instincts."

Her eyes closed on a tremor, and she took a deep, slow breath. "Help me up," she whispered.

He turned, easing her into a sitting position, his lips brushing her closed eyelids briefly, tenderly. "You go to my head, love," he whispered. "I can't trust either one of us right now. Here." He handed her the ginger ale.

She took a swallow of her drink and almost choked. Her face was red and her breathing quick and erratic. She felt cold and empty and lost without the comfort of his arms to warm her.

He finished his own drink in two large swallows and stood up. "Come on, honey, I'll walk you over."

She put the glass down on the table, trying to keep her eyes away as he tucked his shirt back into his trousers. She picked her shawl up off the carpet where

his restless hands had tossed it.

She held the flimsy covering tight around her during the short walk in the nippy night air. Cal walked apart from her, not touching her, and she began to feel a twinge of guilt, of shame, at the way she'd responded to him. She was only one in a crowd, a faceless crowd of women, and the knowledge stung.

"About . . . about this weekend . . . " she begun quietly.

He turned to her under the carport light and pressed a long finger against her swollen lips. "Come with me. I won't touch you again if you don't want me to."

She dropped her eyes. "It isn't that. I just feel..."

He leaned forward, and she felt his lips press slowly, warmly, fiercely against her forehead, his hands coming forward to hold her shoulders in a viselike grip. "Did I go too far with you tonight, is that it? Or did I make you wake up and see that your great love affair was as lukewarm as a baby's milk?" he growled.

"That's unfair!"

"No, it isn't." He held her away and looked down into her mutinous eyes. "Or don't you remember who called the screeching halt when we were on the couch?"

Her lower lip trembled. "You brute!"

"I'm that, all right. My God, I must have been out of my mind tonight," he breathed roughly. "I never

stooped to cradle robbing before.”

“I’m not a child!” All the anger went out of her, all the love she was trying so hard to submerge came back with killing force. She reached up and touched his dark hair which in the moonlight seemed to have more silver than usual. “And you’re not an old man, for all that you’re doing your best to convince me you are. Shall I make you a glass of warm milk, Mr. Forrest?” she teased.

At the sound of his name, something flashed in his eyes for an instant, flinched in a muscle in his firm jaw. He sighed deeply.

“One day, soon,” he said quietly, “we’re going to have a long talk.”

“About what?”

He smiled gently. “Warm milk, maybe.” He brushed a careless kiss across her forehead. “Sleep well. We’ll leave for the airport about six a.m. tomorrow. Too early for you?”

She shook her head with a smile. She’d have thought nothing about getting up two a.m., if it had meant spending time with him. “Casual clothes this time?”

“Jeans and tops and at least one long-sleeved blouse and sneakers. I’m taking you to a place where only fish live,” he said menacingly, “and sandflies.”

“Sandflies bite,” she recalled.

“Like hell. Inside. I need my beauty sleep.”

“Is that what it is?” she asked from the doorway.

“Doesn’t help you much, does it?”

She closed the door on his violent reply.

CHAPTER 6

It was dark when they got into the Mercedes with their luggage and started for the airport.

“It’s only going to be overnight, isn’t it?” Madeline asked, feeling comfortable in her jeans and navy blue blouse. “I left plenty of water and food down for Cabbage, but only for a day and a night. She’s such a glutton, she eats it all in the beginning.”

“Just like my dog,” he chuckled. “They’ll be all right. Do you have a fishing license?”

“Nope. See how efficient I am? See why old McCallum loves me so?” she teased.

“If the truth were known,” he told her, “I’ll bet old McCallum loves you like hell.”

“Worships me from afar, you mean?” She laughed, enjoying the early morning, the ride, his company. In his own jeans and a worn knit shirt, he looked every inch a

fisherman, and she wondered absently why he insisted on pretending he had money. It didn't matter to her one way or the other. It was the man she loved. Loved. She leaned her head against the seat with a sigh.

"McCallum worships the corporation, honey," he said gruffly. "Didn't you know? It's his life."

She cut her eyes to the distant Atlanta skyline, brilliant lights over the sleepy little outsprung communities. "That crash must have been terrible for him," she said quietly. "And the little boy. . . ."

He switched on the radio, tuning it to a station with soothing music. "We'll make it to Columbus in about thirty minutes, with luck. I hope you filled your stomach up before we left," he added.

"I did. And I bought some seasick tablets along, too," she said smugly. Where he couldn't see, she crossed her fingers with a silent prayer. If she got airsick this time, it was going to be a very long flight.

There was something magic in the sleek lines of the red and white Cessna 310. It had the grace of the big twin-engine bird it was, and Madeline loved the feel of it in the air. Sitting there, strapped in beside Cal, she felt as safe as any sea gull.

"I love it!" she said aloud, watching the clouds sail above in fluffy white sculptures.

He glanced sideways at her and smiled, his eyes

never leaving the controls for more than an instant. “Cessnas have a good safety record,” he told her. “And sexy lines—like a woman.”

She watched his long-fingered hands at the controls, and saw the ease with which he mastered the big plane. It had been like that with her, leisurely expertness in the way he mastered her struggles and her fears....

She turned her eyes out the window and watched the small towns appear and grow large on the horizon as they approached. Everything was misty with haze, and the houses and cars looked like toys from that altitude.

* * *

In no time at all, they were landing in Columbus. Cal checked in with the fixed base operator and bought her a Coke from the machine snack bar.

“Dan and Merry should be here any minute,” he told her, easing his big frame down next to hers on the wooden bench as he munched on a cracker. “I called them before we left Atlanta. You’ll like them. Just plain people, no frills.”

She snatched one of his crackers and nibbled at it. “You told them I was coming?” she asked, delighting in the cool soft drink that eased the suffocating heat.

“That’s why Merry’s coming to meet us,” he grinned. “I’ve never brought a woman here before. She’s

curious.”

“Knowing you, she probably expects a blonde in a red satin dress,” she teased wickedly.

His dark eyes narrowed, dropping suggestively to her mouth. “Wait till I get you alone, little cat,” he threatened.

She stared at her ragged cracker with great interest. “What will you do?” she asked.

“Bruise that soft mouth until it opens under mine, the way it did last night,” he murmured deeply.

The blush went all the way to her hairline. She finished the rest of her cracker and washed it down with a swallow of the soft drink, avoiding the howling amusement in his eyes.

“Here they are,” he said, rising as a new yellow Lincoln town car pulled up a few yards away.

She gaped at the car. “Just plain folks?” she croaked.

“That’s what I said.” He took her arm, picked up the two suitcases under the other arm and marched her off to meet the newcomers.

He was tall and thin and dark, she was small and blonde and fair, and Cal introduced the middle-aged couple as the Colmans.

“We’re so glad to meet you,” Merry said with a radiant smile at Madeline. “I didn’t know there were many women left who liked fishing.”

“Actually,” Madeline said with a smile, “I’m better at drowning worms than anything else, but I like the excuse of a fishing pole to sit on a bank and think.”

“Don’t we all,” Dan Colman laughed, his leathery skin crinkling in the sun. “Well, if you’re ready, let’s get home. I’d like to show Miss Blainn around the place before you head for the pond.”

Madeline’s first impression was of softly rolling green pastures lined by tall, straight pine trees and dotted with hardwoods and Jersey cows.

“We have three-hundred and fifty cows, all Jerseys,” Merry was explaining as they rode in the comfort of the air-conditioned Lincoln. “And we sell every bit of our milk locally.”

“Dan’s golden idea.” Cal chuckled. “He processes and bottles it in gallons here on the farm and sells most of it in a little retail outlet adjacent to the dairy. He doesn’t lack for customers.”

“It’s a living.” Dan grinned.

The tour took about an hour. It was a big farm, and Madeline’s head was whirling with cows and barns and milking machines and increased production figures when they finally arrived at the sprawling white-frame farmhouse.

“You’ve got fifteen minutes to freshen up, and then we’re going” Cal called after her as she followed Merry

toward the bedroom down the hall.

“Yes, sahib!” she called back.

“Men,” Merry laughed. “There’s no dealing with them.” She pointed out the bathroom and linen closet. “Anything else you need, just call. I’m glad you came. You know, he laughed today,” she said seriously. “I haven’t seen him do that in years, not since....”

Madeline only smiled. “I’m glad he has friends like you,” she said gently. “He’s a man who needs them very much.”

“Are you just a friend?” Merry asked quietly. “Forgive me for asking, but the way he looks at you....”

“We’re both finding our feet right now. I . . . care for him very much,” she admitted gently.

Merry touched her arm lightly. “Freshen up. I’ll pack some fried pies and a thermos of coffee for you to take along. Cal won’t quit for lunch even if the fish aren’t biting.”

“Thank you,” Madeline called after her.

The fried pies were delicious three hours later as she sat beside Cal on the banks of the pond, literally smeared with insect repellent and starving to death. On the string submerged in the water was one fish, a hand-wide big mouth bass that Cal had pulled in himself. Madeline’s count so far was ten worms drowned and nothing to show for it.

“Why don’t I just toss the worms into the water?” she asked as she munched the delicious apple pie with its tasty brown crust. “I’d accomplish the same thing.”

He glanced at her in amusement. “Quitting?”

She stiffened. “Never. I never quit!”

“That makes two of us. Pour me a cup of coffee, honey.”

She poured the thick black liquid into a mug and handed it to him. He took it, brushing her fingers with his in a gentle caress.

“You’re good company,” he remarked, laying the fishing pole aside to grab an apple pie and take a bite out of it. “No chatter.”

She smiled. “My uncle taught me that fish don’t like noisy conversation. What he didn’t teach me was to hold my mouth right.”

“So the fish would bite, you mean?” he asked, finishing the pie and swallowing it down with the coffee.

“Ummmm,” she said, her eyes drifting lazily over the ripples on the pond, the lazy brush of the green limbs where the sultry breeze touched them and the trees far away on the horizon.

Cal’s big arm went around her unexpectedly, and he pressed her down against the soft grass on the bank, looming over her.

She laid her hands against his broad chest and gaped up at him. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to show you how to hold your mouth," he said with a dark, wicked grin, and bent his head.

"No . . . fair," she whispered as his hard mouth moved slowly, relentlessly onto hers.

"In this, anything is fair," he murmured roughly, and his mouth was suddenly hot and hard and insistently demanding.

She stopped trying to think and reached up, drawing the full weight of that massive chest down against her while she returned the kiss with a hungry, burning eagerness.

The sudden blare of a car horn came between them. She pulled away and sat up, her mouth red and swollen, her face like fire as the Lincoln pulled up in a small dirt turnaround by the pond's edge.

"Sorry to interrupt," Merry called from the driver's seat, "but we're going over to see the Little White House at Warm Springs. If the fish aren't biting, want to come?"

"You'd better say yes," Cal warned her in a husky, strange voice. "Because if we stay here, my mind isn't going to be on the fish any longer."

"We'd . . . love to!" Madeline called breathlessly, and began to gather up the picnic items scattered around

them.

“Hellcat,” Cal teased as he helped her and then stood up, drawing her with him. He looked deep into her misty, yielded eyes. “You set fires in my blood, woman. Do you know that? What were you trying to tell me with that kiss?”

She pulled her eyes away from his. “I . . . I enjoyed the fishing.”

“Oh God, honey, so did I,” he whispered huskily. “Let’s go.”

Dan drove, and Cal sat in the front seat with him, leaving Madeline and Merry to talk in the back seat. It was only a few miles to President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s famous Little White House, and Madeline was looking forward to her visit.

The grounds were immaculate, green and cool and quiet, a refuge for a busy man. Nestled in the trees was the small white house where Roosevelt died, roses climbing up two of the four columns on the front porch, shutters at the windows.

The wood floors were spotless, highly waxed, and they echoed with every footstep. Inside it was like a shrine; even to speak seemed a sacrilege. Everything was as the late President had left it, from his favorite chair to the sparsely furnished bedroom where he drew his last breath.

Quietly, they moved outside to the walk of state stones and flags, and with quiet sighs they moved among the colorful flags.

Cal caught Madeline's slender hand as they walked, holding it gently in his, and when he caught her eyes she saw something in his face that stopped her in her tracks.

He frowned down at her, his eyes narrow and pained. "There's something I've got to tell you," he said gently. "Something I should have told you in the beginning."

"What?" she asked.

"Not here. Not now." He looked down at their clasped hands. "But very soon, love, very soon."

He said the endearment with a practiced ease—but there was a new sincerity in it, almost as if he really meant . . .

"Come on, you two," Merry called gaily. "Let's go look at that old Ford convertible with the hand controls!"

And the magic passed, to be caught up in the excitement of rediscovering the past.

* * *

That night, they sat on the Colmans' front porch with the farm couple and listened to the peace of country living. It was, Madeline thought, so very different from

the sound of subdivisions. No blaring horns, no screeching tires, no noisy neighbors—nothing, in fact, except the pleasant noise the crickets and June flies were making and the distant baying of hounds.

“I could stay here forever,” Madeline sighed, dropping against Cal’s broad shoulder where they sat in the slow-moving porch swing.

Cal laughed softly. “What would McCallum do without you?” he asked.

“He wouldn’t hire another redhead, if the truth were known, I’ll bet,” she teased.

“Sleepy?” Cal asked her.

She nodded.

“Go on in. We’ll sleep late tomorrow and start back about noon. Good night, Burgundy.”

She stood up and smiled down at him. “Thanks for today.”

“It was my pleasure, in every sense of the word. ‘Night.”

“‘Night. Good night Dan, Merry,” she said, vaguely disappointed when Cal didn’t follow her. With a sigh she moved down the hall and was at the door when she heard the heavy stride behind her.

She turned as Cal loomed over her. “I forgot something,” he said softly and drew her gently against the length of his big body, bending toward her.

She reached up to meet him halfway, looping her arms around his neck as his mouth came down on hers with a slow, warm tenderness that sent time spinning away. She clung to him, drowning in his nearness, in the kiss that made a mockery of any other caress she'd ever known, returning his gentle ardor with reckless abandon, uncaring of what she was giving away about her own feelings.

He drew back finally, and looked down at her, his eyes dark and quiet, his breath deep and uneven.

His big hands slipped up her back to the nape of her neck, cupping her head as he bent again, lightly brushing his mouth against her.

“Good night, sweetheart,” he whispered.

Her lips trembled at the tenderness in that dark, leonine face. “Oh, Cal . . .” she whispered brokenly.

He put her from him and drew back. “Don’t tempt me, honey, don’t dare. Go to bed.”

She turned away, forcing her numb hand to open the bedroom door, not looking as she pushed it shut. The look on his face had said everything.

She rose the next morning to find Cal withdrawn and moody, his mind clearly on a problem of some sort. There was tension between them suddenly, not the easy companionship of past days, and the Colmans seemed to sense it too.

The goodbyes were said, with promises to come again, but all the way back to Atlanta, Cal hardly said a word.

They landed at the metropolitan airport, and Cal parked the airplane with quiet, cool efficiency. Madeline scanned the rows of planes of all sizes and shapes, searching for some safe topic of conversation.

“Do . . . do they always have these planes for rent,” she asked quietly, “or do you have to reserve them . . . ?”

He threw his arm across the back of his seat and turned toward her, his face solemn, his eyes narrow. “I didn’t rent this plane, Burgundy,” he said quietly. “I own it.”

Madeline didn’t know about the market values. But it was a twin-engine plane and brand new, and obviously cost much more than any car. She sat dazedly staring at him, her eyes wide and unblinking.

“That’s right, it cost a lot of money,” he agreed, unsmiling. “I told you at the very beginning that I wasn’t a poor man.”

“But . . . the Mercedes . . .” she was faltering.

“ . . . belongs to Bess. I was keeping it in condition for her. I’ve got a garage full of cars, everything from a Rolls to a Jag,” he replied.

“And . . . Suleiman?” she whispered.

“There have been a few attempts on my life. I don’t like to carry a gun, so I take him with me most places,” he told her. “He’s saved my skin more than once. In my line of work, I make enemies.”

“You’re . . . in construction you said.”

“I build airplanes,” he told her with narrowed eyes. “At least, one of my corporations does. My God, it’s been under your nose all this time, and you haven’t even guessed!”

She felt the apprehension like a living thing. “What do you mean, Cal?” she asked.

“I’m McCallum.”

CHAPTER 7

Even with that surge of inner warning, the words hit her with the force of a body blow. She sat there, breathless, utterly winded, suddenly recalling all the things she'd told him, confided him about the job, about her absent boss, and she wanted to go down through the cockpit with embarrassment. Everything was different. He wasn't her friend. He was the phantom, McCallum. He was a cruel, uncaring stranger who lived only for his work, who'd used her to spy on his employees. She hated him. Hated him!

With a cry of anguish, she wrenched the door open and clambered down the wing to the ground and took off at a dead run.

She headed straight for the airport coffee shop and sat down at a table, tearfully oblivious to the big, dark man following slowly behind her. She got her coffee and

sat alternately sipping it and wiping her eyes with a crumpled tissue from her small purse.

She caught a movement out of the corner of her watery eyes just as Cal sat quietly down at the table beside her, his gray eyes dark, his arms folded on the table as he watched her. "Can we talk about it?" he asked in a tone that was strangely gentle, not at all like the steely, commanding one she was used to.

"What is there to talk about?" she asked, her voice husky with tears. "I trusted you."

He ran a big hand through his wavy hair with a sigh. "I know, I almost told you a hundred times. I should have done it to begin with, but you were so damned blind."

"Naive," she corrected, sipping her coffee. Her eyes closed painfully. "No wonder you thought I was chasing you," she whispered.

"Only at first," he corrected.

"I'm sorry . . . for what I called you," she stammered.

A tiny smile touched his hard mouth. "Evenly Fried, you mean? Only around the edges, little one. For what it's worth, the initials stand for Edward Forrest."

"Oh." Tears welled in her eyes again.

"Will you, for God's sake, stop crying? It isn't the end of the world, nothing's changed between us,

Burgundy!” he growled.

She dabbed at her face with the handkerchief. “Everything’s changed. You’re a stranger.”

He caught her hand and held it firmly. “I’m the same man who kissed you last night.”

She shook her head. “He was Cal Forrest. You’re . . . you’re my boss,” she managed.

“So what?” he demanded, exasperation in his deep voice.

She glanced up at him. “What are you worth on today’s market, Mr. McCallum—ten million, twenty? I buy all my clothes on sale, and I cut my grocery budget to the bone, and I drive an economy car because that’s what I can afford. I wouldn’t fit into your world in any capacity.”

“You’ve been fitting into it pretty damned well,” he countered.

“But you weren’t McCallum,” she replied quietly, her dark eyes sad with regret. “You were just a man named Cal Forrest who wore shirts with frayed collars and kept an incorrigible dog. Why were you really staying there?”

“My apartment’s being redone,” he told her. “I needed rest. That seemed the best place to get it. A man who can’t be found can’t be harassed to death. My phone rings constantly, little girl. Twenty-four hours a

day. The pressure very nearly got to me, so I took a rest.”

She looked down at her ringless hands. “And who is Bess, really?”

“My mistress. Didn’t you work that one out for yourself?”

“Oh, yes,” she said wryly. “It wasn’t quite in keeping with my idea of Cal Forrest, but it does suit you, yes, sir.”

“Women like my money, Miss Blainn,” he told her with a bitter irony in his voice. “I’ve been chased like some prize stallion. You were a breath of fresh sea air.”

“Thank you for that. I’m glad I didn’t join the ranks.”

“That wasn’t part of the plan, Burgundy,” he said.

“It wasn’t? Not even in Panama City?” she persisted.

He sighed deeply, his eyes on his clasped hands. “Then yes. But that was before I was sure about you.”

She drew a slow, deep breath and finished her coffee. “It was a nice fishing trip, thank you for taking me with you.”

“Is that goodbye?” he asked in a soft, biting tone.

“Not entirely. I still work for you. I suppose?” she asked deliberately.

“For the time being, yes, madam, you do.” He rose,

pulling her chair back for her.

She looked up at him. "I liked you very much in frayed shirts and old jeans," she said quietly.

His eyes narrowed, glittering like silver in sunlight. "In my business, I learned quick not to make snap judgments about people without facts to back them up. Something you're still in the process of learning, I imagine, little girl."

She had the grace to blush, but she couldn't answer him. She let him lead her out of the coffee shop and put her in the black Mercedes.

The three miles home were the longest she'd ever ridden. Not one single word passed between them. He let her out at the back door, with her bags, and with a nod was gone—out of her life.

She dragged herself into the office the next day, looking so drawn and unlike herself that Brenda thought she was ill.

"What's the *matter* with you?" she asked at break. "My gosh, you look like you've seen a headless ghost!"

"I have."

"Maddy . . . !"

She wrapped her fingers around her coffee cup, gazing blankly around the canteen where the other secretaries and typists were huddled over the tables swapping office gossip.

“Heard any more about McCallum?” she asked.

Brenda nodded. “They say he’s coming back in sometime this week. Richards got the boot early this morning, and old man James got a secretary of his own. You’d think McCallum had inside information.” She laughed.

“He did,” Madeline said wearily. “Guess who my new neighbor turned out to be?”

Brenda looked blank. “The one with the dog? The one who nursed you when you were sick and wouldn’t let me near you? The old ugly bulldozer? McCallum?”

“You aren’t any more shocked than I was. I feel ten years older this morning,” she sighed.

“And you look it, too. Oh, gosh, Maddy, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry,” she said sympathetically. “You liked the guy a lot, didn’t you?”

Liked. Now there, she thought bitterly, was a truly inadequate word.

“Yes,” she replied. “I liked the man I thought he was, just a common, ordinary man who liked to go fishing and listen to soft music, and watch the waves at night. What a pity,” she finished unsteadily, “that he turned out to be an illusion.”

“The blonde?” Brenda fished.

“Guess.”

She shook her head. “Sorry. Why didn’t he tell you

who he was?”

“Ask him.”

“Did you?”

Madeline shrugged. “What would have been the use? I don’t have champagne tastes.”

“Most of us,” Brenda reminded her, “could acquire them pretty easily to land a man like that.”

“I don’t think so.” She smiled. “I’m still that much a romantic that I think love comes before money.”

Brenda met her eyes squarely. “Tell me you weren’t in love with him.”

The words went all the way to her soul. She finished her coffee and stood up. “We’d better get back to work or we’ll be like Mr. Richards—out hunting work.”

“Go ahead, ignore me,” Brenda said. “You can’t ignore your heart, though.” And it was true.

She worked late that night, to keep busy, to keep from going home. There was an emptiness inside her that had nothing to do with a lack of food. It was a lack of hope that was killing her.

She stared blankly at her typewriter. McCallum. McCallum. Had it only been a few weeks since she sat here and wondered what he looked like? Had it been such a short time instead of the lifetime it seemed to be? Her mind went stubbornly back to their first meeting,

and every cryptic remark he'd made suddenly became crystal clear. Beside the stream, when she'd asked his name, and he'd replied, "you really don't know do you?" it was because he thought she was playing games. But this was a far more serious game than she could have realized and losing brought a terrible penalty with it.

It was the end of so many things. Of companionship on nights when the loneliness got up and breathed in her living room. Of impromptu picnics and rides in the darkness and plane trips to out-of-the-way places, and that deep, lazy voice drawling in her ear over the phone. . . .

* * *

She choked back a sob. Most of all, she'd miss those unexpected phone calls, when he'd invite her over for a steak or just a little conversation, and she could sit and watch him without him knowing it, imprint his dark, hard face on her memory so that she could remember it perfectly when he was not around.

Setting her lips in a thin line, she finished the letter she was working on, folded it, put it in the envelope and stamped it. No more looking back. If she was to keep her sanity, no more looking back!

She broke the resolution the minute she turned into

her driveway, feeling cold chills run up and down her spine as she saw the black Mercedes sitting in the driveway across the hedge.

With resignation, she sped her little car up under the carport, jumped out and opened the door with speed that would have done credit to a track runner, got inside the house and locked the door. But she needn't have bothered. There were no heavy, measured footsteps following her. The phone wasn't ringing either, although she spent the first hour at home waiting for it to.

"For that, I'd need a miracle," she told Cabbage with a sad smile. "I've burned my bridges, Cabbage, and now I don't know how I'm going to get across the gorge."

She was turning back to the stove, where she was just starting a couple of hamburger patties, when there was a jaunty ringing of the doorbell.

Her heart was in her throat, her face a study in abject pleasure, she ran to throw open the door . . . and found on the other side of it not Cal, but Cousin Horace.

"Why, cousin Madeline, as I live and breathe!" he said enthusiastically, and flashed her a toothy grin under eyes as brown as his father's.

"Horace, as I die and suffocate!" she returned with a forced laugh, measuring him. "Thinner than ever, I see."

He touched his blond hair where it was beginning to

recede at the hairline despite the fact that he was only thirty years old. "Well, I still have a little left. Can I come in, or would you rather I set up housekeeping under your carport? I've got a blanket in here," he mumbled, eyeing his big suitcase.

"Idiot. Come in."

She stood back and let him inside. "Upstairs first, I'll show you where to put your stuff. How long are you staying?"

"Till in the morning. I'm on my way to Washington to try a case, and you were en route." He grinned. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not, I'll burn another hamburger, and you can have supper with me. How are Uncle Fred and Aunt Johnnie?"

"Too mean to live with. That's why I've got an apartment of my own."

"You've got an apartment because you like girls," she corrected with a laugh.

"As usual, there you go knocking my sterling character." He sighed with mock resignation. "I don't insult yours."

"You haven't been here long enough," she countered, opening the door to the guest room. "If you'd like to freshen up, I'll see about making another hamburger."

"With onions," he called after her. "Lots of onions."

“No wonder you can’t get any girls,” she muttered.

* * *

Horace was great fun, and he took her mind off Cal while they munched their way through hamburgers and french fries.

“You sure have changed,” he said, swallowing down the last of his burger with a tall swallow of iced tea. “A far cry from the freckle-faced little stringbean I used to chase around the house.”

“Why, thank you, sweet cousin. If it was a compliment,” she added thoughtfully.

“It was.” He sighed wearily. “I seem to have been driving forever. By the way, the folks want to know why you won’t ever come see them.”

“Time,” she replied with a smile. “Work takes all of it.”

“That’s not what your friend Brenda told me,” he grinned, then changed the subject when he saw the bitter bleak expression tear the smile from her face. “Speaking of the devil, what does Brenda look like, anyway?” he asked.

“She’s little and fair, with curling blonde locks and limpid green eyes, and a voice like music in the night,” she told him solemnly.

“My God, is she that bad?” he groaned.

She laughed. "She's a dish and unmarried, and she's a live wire at a party. You ought to stop back by on your way home and I'll introduce you."

"Would you really do that to your best friend?"

"With regret, but yes, I would." She smiled at him over her glass, "You're not bad, cousin. I like you most of the time. When you're not trying to get me out of this lovely old house, that is."

He reddened with a grin. "I know, I'm obvious. But I think you're super, too, cuz, and if it weren't the house it'd be something else. I have to have something to argue over."

"That's why you became a lawyer, I'll bet, because you have a steady stream of people to argue with," she told him.

"How did you ever guess!" He laughed.

* * *

It was late when they finished talking over old times and finally went to bed. Understandably, they overslept the next morning.

She was awakened by a loud rap on her door.

"Up and at 'em, Cuz," Horace called. "I'll tiptoe downstairs and start a pot of coffee. You awake?"

"Yes, I'm awake, I'm awake, you do that," she mumbled into her pillow.

With a shrug, Horace went down the stairs in his blue robe, his feet and legs bare, and started toward the kitchen, yawning. He almost stumbled over the cat, cursed, and started to tell her what he thought about cross-eyed cats who couldn't walk straight, when there came a loud knock on the back door.

He wondered idly who it might be at that hour of the morning, and without thinking clearly about it, he threw open the back door.

There was a man standing impatiently on the other side of it. A big, dark, very strange angry man who took one look at the thin stranger in the robe and, without a single word, threw a pile-driving right cross at the thin jaw.

Horace went down and out for the count with a hard thud. And the big, dark man headed straight for the stairs.

He stopped at the head of them and stared at the room he expected to be occupied. With set lips and flashing eyes he caught the doorknob, whirled it, and threw the door wide open with a slam that shook the walls.

Madeline came straight up in the bed, her eyes dilated, disbelieving, and she looked into a face as hard as rock.

"I left your lover downstairs," he said in a voice like

ice. "It didn't take you long, did it, Burgundy?"

Still half asleep, she shook her head as if to clear it. "What are you talking about?" she mumbled.

"That balding excuse for a man in the hall. You're priceless, honey," he said through tight lips, his eyes glittering like silvery fire. "I've been stalked by experts, but you pulled a sack over my eyes. How long did it take you to perfect that innocent act of yours? It's a winner. You damned well ought to be on Broadway with it!"

"Cal, it's not . . . " she began, finally realizing what he was getting at.

"Save it!" he shot at her. "What were you going to do, let me stew for a few days, then come back over with a home baked pie and welcome me back with open arms? Just your style, isn't it? Well, for your information little girl, I didn't stew. You should have held on while you had the chance, you could have been on easy street for life. But right now, you're going to be damned lucky if you don't starve."

She ran her hands through her confused, tousled hair. "What are you talking about?"

"You're fired."

She gaped at him. "I'm . . . what?" she gasped.

"Fired. Canned. Through." He eyed her slender figure under the covers with a contempt that made her

shrink back against the pillows. “Furthermore, little temptress, you’re going to be looking for another job for one hell of a long time, because you’re leaving my employ without a reference to your name. Tit for tat. At that, it’s less than I owe you!”

“What have I done?” she burst out.

“Don’t throw that wide-eyed innocent look at me, I’m cured!” His eyes narrowed, his deep voice cut like tempered steel. “By God, no woman makes a fool of me and gets away with it. What did you hope to get out of it, a villa in France or a mink? You almost made it if you’d just stuck it out another day, but you got impatient for a man, didn’t you? Did you grit your teeth every time I touched you?”

“Cal?” she whispered incredulously. “You don’t think I . . . ?”

“The hell I don’t.” He glared at her across the room. “You were just like the rest of them, after the golden egg, and I was too damned blind to see it. You’re nothing. Just a red-headed little opportunist who saw a good thing and tried to use it. But it wasn’t so easy after all, was it, you little tramp. For what it’s worth, I was tempted. But even a professional like you can make mistakes, and you’re about to learn just how forgiving I am.”

“It’s not what you think!” she whispered, her eyes

pleading with him.

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. "More tricks? Save it for a rainy day. I can buy all the women I want, but I'm particular. I don't like second-hand merchandise, even in my mistresses. And I particularly don't like worthless little street-corner tramps like you. You're not worth the powder it'd take to blow you to hell."

She felt the insults as though he'd slapped her across the mouth. All she could do was sit there and take it, and tears welled in her eyes.

He pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and tossed them carelessly on the foot of her bed. "For services rendered," he said curtly. "I'll have your severance pay mailed to you, and don't bother working out any notice. You are unemployed, Miss Blainn, as of now. You'll have to find another street corner."

With a glance of utter distaste, he turned and stormed out the door. She slammed her face into her pillow and wept like a whipped child.

Vaguely, she heard footsteps and heard Horace's voice close beside her.

"Cuz, don't. Oh, gosh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize he wouldn't know who I was," he said helplessly. "Cuz, do you want me to go after him and explain?"

"No," she choked. "No! He said things to me that

I'll never get over, never forget! I hope . . . I hope I never have to look at him again. Oh, Horace!" she moaned, and the tears fell faster.

He patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Look, if anyone should be crying, it's me. What a right cross! My jaw feels like raw meat!"

She turned over and looked at him. His whole lower face was beginning to show the bruise where that powerful fist had connected.

"Oh, Horace, I'm sorry," she whispered tearfully.

"My fault." He shrugged. "I should have ducked. Did he have a hold of some sort on you?"

"He was my boss. That," she pointed toward the green bills, crumpled and strewn on the covers, "is my severance pay, I guess. Of all the vicious, narrow-minded, low-down . . . !"

"Well, it didn't look exactly proper, did it?" he asked. "And from what Brenda told me, the two of you were. . . ."

"Just finish putting the coffee on while I get dressed," she said, trying to wipe the tears away. "I've got to think about what I'm going to do. Don't look so miserable, Horace. It isn't the end of the world. It's just the predictable end of a not-so-beautiful friendship."

CHAPTER 8

She dressed as if she were a zombie, her mind on the fiery brutality she'd suffered—on that beast next door! The things he'd said, the names he'd called her made her shudder with hurt and rage.

To fire her over a misunderstanding—had he really thought so little of her that he could believe she'd take a lover the day after she said goodbye to him? Did he know so little about her? Her eyes closed on a moan of pure anguish.

And where would she go? Jobs were scarce right now. There wasn't any rent to worry about, since she owned the house; but she had a car payment coming up and utilities to pay, and only a meager amount of savings in the bank.

Her eyes went back to the wad of notes on the bed. With anger-inspired haste, she wrapped them in a plain

sheet of paper, addressed an envelope to Cal, stuffed the disguised money into it and stamped it. She'd mail that back to him today. He could give it to Bess, "for services rendered." She choked back the tears as she smoothed her yellow sundress and dragged herself down the stairs moodily.

"Well, made any decision?" Horace asked quietly. He was already dressed in his gray business suit. He looked very dignified, every inch a lawyer in his fine feathers.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down wearily at the breakfast bar.

"I've got enough in the bank to pay the bills for a month or so," she said. "And I'm still owed a vacation that I'll never get. I think I'll pay Uncle Fred and Aunt Johnnie that visit now, just for a few days, until I can get myself back together. I need to lick my wounds," she said with a watery smile.

"You cared very much, didn't you, little Madeline?" he asked kindly.

She nodded, biting her lip as the tears welled over in her eyes. "I'll get over it," she whispered. "Life does go on, I learned that when Phillip died. However much it hurts for a little while, life goes on."

"I can't say how sorry. . . ."

"Horace, we'd already parted company," she said

gently. "You didn't cause anything that wouldn't have happened anyway."

"I wonder why he came over here?" he asked shrewdly.

She shrugged. "Probably to say goodbye again. God, he's good at it!"

"It was pure temper, you know. He probably didn't mean half of what he said."

"What he said was enough." She stood up. "I'm going to pack a few things. I'll drop Cabbage off at the vet on my way out of town. And I'll mail that," she said angrily, tossing the envelope full of money on the bar next to her half-full cup.

* * *

Within an hour, she'd waved Horace good-bye, packed the car, boarded Cabbage at the vet, locked up the house and was on her way. She couldn't help noticing that the black Mercedes was gone from next door . . . or that the shiny red Jaguar was back once again. At least, she thought bitterly, Cal wouldn't be lonely now. Bess was home.

* * *

Fred and Johnnie Blainn had a small farm on the

outskirts of Gainesville, and it bordered on Lake Lanier. It was literally a two-story outfit, and Fred kept a couple of dozen head of cattle, and despite his sixty-eight years managed to keep active. The farm was a far cry from the several-hundred acre spread he once had, but his age was prohibitive, as much as he hated to admit it.

Madeline loved the big white house on the sloping hill, nestled in trees so big they almost covered it. Mostly, she liked the porch swing where she could sit and look over the pasture and, farther, to the busy highway far beyond Fred's gates. She could breathe here. And if her father's brother guessed that her sudden visit was more than an urge for a few days' vacation, he was kind enough not to pry.

* * *

The days were long, but the nights were ten times longer. She couldn't close her eyes without seeing Cal as she had that last time, his face dark with anger, his silvery eyes blazing at her. No matter how she tried, she couldn't forget the things he'd said. . . .

As if sensing the need to keep her mind occupied, Fred and Johnnie planned short trips around the area and put all their energies into making her visit pleasant. But none of it was enough. The hurt went too deep.

"Maddy, what are you hiding from?" Uncle Fred asked her one evening while they sat on the porch steps listening to the crickets.

"A man," she replied quietly. "Horace will probably tell you all about it when he comes home, but I can't . . . I just can't."

He ran his hand through his gray hair with a sigh. "Well, there isn't much I can give you in the way of advice except this. No matter how far you run or how fast, the problem you thought you left behind will be two steps ahead of you, waiting. All you're doing is giving it new surroundings."

She lowered her eyes to the sharp, jagged pattern of light on the yard coming from the window. "I know. I guess I knew from the beginning. I was hurt, though, and I needed someone to run to." She leaned her head against his thin shoulder. "Thanks for letting me run to you."

He patted her head. "Any time, Maddy, any time. Can I help?"

She laughed softly. "Only I can help, now. I've got to start looking for another job, and there's no time like the present. I'm going home in the morning."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes. Staying here can only make it harder for me.” She toyed restlessly with the zipper of her light windbreaker. “Funny, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’ve had that job for five years. I’m so used to it . . . oh well,” she sighed, “maybe it was time for a change. Coming in?” she asked, standing.

“No. I enjoy the crickets more than television. Good night, honey,” he added on a smile.

“Night.”

* * *

She started back to Atlanta on a full stomach. Johnnie had insisted on cooking a huge breakfast, and Madeline felt her stomach straining at the seams all the way back home.

It was the thing she dreaded most, going home to an empty house with that blonde next door and Cal visiting her there.

Maybe it would be a good idea to let Horace have the house after all and find an apartment somewhere. The memories would choke her from now on. Every time she went in the kitchen, she’d see Cal sitting at the breakfast bar. Every time she walked down to the little stream at the back of the property, she’d remember picnics there. She sighed. Yes, maybe it would be better, after all. Or . . . would that be running away, too?

But the first order of business was to get another job—without a reference. What business was going to even talk to her about a job without knowing where she'd worked before? And if she lied, if she said she hadn't worked anywhere, how would she explain being idle for the past five years? Every idea she came up with seemed to get more and more muddled as she thought it out, until she gave up trying. Let McCallum do his worst! She'd get a job, if she had to take one as a dishwasher!

With her mouth set in a stubborn line, she turned into her driveway. At least the red Jaguar was gone, she thought, after a glance next door. She stopped at the front door long enough to unload the crammed mailbox, and wearily unlocked the door and went inside.

She didn't even bother to get her luggage out of the car; she was too tired. She slumped down on the sofa, missing Cabbage, who still had to be picked up from the vet's. Idly, she thumbed through the mail, through the usual assortment of junk mail until she reached an envelope with McCallum Corporation in the upper left-hand corner.

She opened it angrily to find two weeks' salary and a hastily scrawled note with Brenda's signature: "Maddy, please call me, I'm worried about you."

With a tiny smile, she put the envelope aside. Bless

Brenda, she'd call her tomorrow. Right now, all she wanted was a good night's sleep and the morning want ads.

Light glared against the curtains, and she ignored it as she went into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. Probably it was the blonde coming home, and she couldn't have cared less.

But when a knock came at the back door, while she was filling the pot with water, it startled her. She wiped her hands on a dishcloth and hesitantly went to the back door, flicking on the carport light quickly.

It was McCallum, a very disheveled, very worn McCallum who looked as if he hadn't slept in days.

With a mixture of anger, hurt, rage, and curiosity, she unfastened the door and let him in.

"Yes, Mr. McCallum?" she asked quietly, her tone very businesslike, cold, carefully disciplined.

He studied her face with narrow, hooded eyes, their color disguised so that they looked dark.

"I'd like to talk to you," he said casually, not a hint of emotion betrayed by his expression or his tone.

"In here, then." She led him into the living room, reluctantly remembering kinder times when they'd have talked over coffee at the breakfast bar and laughed. This stilted atmosphere was so alien, it made her want to cry instead.

She sat down on the sofa, and he took the armchair across from her, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees.

“You’ve been away five days,” he said quietly.

She shrugged, amazed that he’d even noticed. “I went to visit my aunt and uncle in Gainesville.”

His eyes narrowed. “There’s no need to cover up anymore. I told you once that your love life was none of my business.”

She gaped at him. “What?”

“I don’t give a damn if you went away with your lover. Is that clear enough?” he growled.

Her eyes widened. “Mr. McCallum . . .” she began gathering anger along the way as the meaning penetrated.

He waved the words aside with a sweep of one big hand. “What the hell does it matter? I came here to see what arrangements you’d made about another job.”

She lifted her face proudly. “I’m doing just fine, thanks. A reference isn’t always a necessity,” she added.

“Which means, in plain English, you haven’t found anything.”

She dropped her eyes to the carpet, to his highly polished black shoes. “I’ll get a job washing dishes if I have to,” she said quietly.

“I don’t doubt it, you’re stubborn as all hell,” he

replied flatly.

She looked at her lap, not at him. “Why are you here? I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow, and I’m very tired,” she said in a subdued tone, so unlike her usual spirited one that he sat staring at her for a long time before he replied.

“Come back to work.”

She stared at him. “After what you called me, after the things you said, you expect me to . . . !” she exploded.

“I’ve got a temper,” he interrupted, his voice as calm and commanding as ever. “You saw it because I had a totally different concept of you, worlds away from the woman I saw here that morning. So it’s none of my business, all right, I’ll buy that. But you told me a lie, and, damn you, I swallowed it.” His slate eyes narrowed. “I don’t like cheap tricks, not when they’re played at my expense. You could have leveled with me at the beginning. I wouldn’t have thought any less of you. Not even if you’d said no to me when you said yes to every other man. Was it so impossible to be honest with me?”

Her spine stiffened. “The same way you were honest with me, Mr. McCallum?” she asked with an icy smile.

He clasped his hands between his knees with a

heavy sigh. “The unflappable Miss Blainn,” he observed. “Oh, yes, I heard all about it. Your reputation is carved in stone at the office. Brenda’s been a veritable ongoing documentary about your life. I didn’t know you at all, did I, little girl?”

“That works both ways.” She toyed with the hem of her slacks. “Why do you want me to come back to work?”

“Because with Richards gone, you’re the only person who can fill in the blanks for me on our present domestic operations,” he replied.

“On the condition that you’ll give me a recommendation,” she replied quietly, “I’ll come back on a temporary basis.”

“A month should do it,” he told her. “And let’s get it clear at the beginning this time that I’m asking you back into my life in a business capacity only.”

She felt her dark eyes burning as they met his. “You did get the envelope back, I hope?” she asked.

He looked briefly uncomfortable. “I got it.”

“If I’d thought about it, I’d have added ten cents worth of interest.”

His eyes narrowed dangerously. “Keep it up,” he warned.

“No, thanks, I’ve had my say.” She stood up. “Now, if you don’t mind, this is my home, and any one

of my five lovers may decide to drop in tonight. They're insanely jealous, you know, so it wouldn't do for them to find you here, would it, Evenly Fried McCallum?" she added coldly.

He just stood there, breathing deeply, his expression enough to fell a lesser woman.

"I don't care if you don't like what I say. You've said unforgivable things about me, things that I don't deserve, and one day you're going to realize just how wrong you are." She stopped, holding the back door open for him, and looked up with sadness yet defiance in her brown eyes. "I'm sorry for you, Mr. McCallum. You've lived around deceitful people for so long that you can't even recognize honesty anymore. You must be a very lonely man."

"I've got all the women I need," he countered with a wisp of a mocking smile.

"As long as you can afford to pay for them, I don't doubt it," she agreed. "But if you got sick, how many of them would look after you if you didn't have a dime in the bank?"

His eyes looked her up and down insolently. "Would you?" he asked sarcastically.

"Once," she whispered huskily.

A muscle in his jaw twitched, but his eyes gave nothing away. "Was that before or after you found out

how much I was worth?" he asked cruelly.

She smiled viciously. "After, of course!"

"You never answered me. Are you coming back to work, or not?"

"I'll see you promptly at 8:30 a.m. tomorrow, *Mr. McCallum*," she said.

He walked leisurely out the door, pausing under the carport to shoot a glance at her set face. "Don't bring your private animosities into my office in the morning, Miss Blainn," he warned gently, "or I'll grind you into the carpet."

And before she could find a reply, he disappeared into the darkness.

* * *

Brenda grabbed her like a long lost sister when she walked into the office the next morning.

"Oh, Maddy, you just don't know how good it is to have you back!" her friend exclaimed.

Madeline raised both eyebrows. "Really? Or did McCallum just drive you up the wall?"

Brenda smiled sheepishly. "Well a little bit of both. I've never worked for anybody like him! Honestly, when he wasn't yelling, he was throwing things out of the filing cabinet looking for accounts. I thought I'd have to quit, if you didn't come back. Just look!" she

wailed, pointing at the two stacks of file folders on top of the cabinets. “And I haven’t even had time to file them again!”

Madeline sighed. “Looks like the morning’s already accounted for. It took hours to file them the first time.”

“It’s really strange,” Brenda sighed. “McCallum’s old secretary—you know, Elaine, who works over in accounts receivable?—said that he’s the easiest man in the world to get along with. Do you suppose Elaine’s deaf?”

Madeline smiled wistfully. “I’ll bet we’ll wish we were before we’re through.”

“What happened?” Brenda asked softly.

“I can’t tell you.” She drew a shaky breath. “Well, I’ll get to. . . .”

About that time, the door to McCallum’s office flew open, and the tall, dark man came through it, his face like a thundercloud. In his expensive dark suit, and a white silk shirt with its very sedate blue pinstripe tie, he looked every inch a corporation magnate, and every inch a stranger. He waved an overstuffed file at the two women.

“Will you tell me where the hell I’m supposed to look for the Johnson Corporation file?” he asked in a soft dangerous tone. “This is Johnson Securities, and it’s the only ‘Johnson’ listed.”

Calmly, Madeline opened the filing cabinet and quickly flicked through the files to the 'S' section.

She handed him a new file, accepting the one he was holding out. "Johnson Corporation," she told him. "We file it under the 'S's for subsidiary. And if you'd keep your fingers out of the files, Mr. McCallum, I wouldn't have to waste an entire morning, of *your* time refiling them," she added just as calmly.

Brenda turned white from her shoes up, but Madeline stood her ground, staring up at him, without flinching, without emotion.

His head lifted, and he looked down his arrogant nose at her through slitted eyes.

"Think you're tough, don't you?" he asked without a hint of expression on his dark face.

"I'd have to be to work for you. Sir," she added sweetly.

One dark eyebrow went up. "You thought you were tough before." He turned around and started back toward his office. "But Suleiman didn't."

Brenda relaxed against her desk in an exaggerated pose as the door closed behind the big man..

"How can you talk to him like that?" she gasped. "My gosh, he scares me to death! And who's Suleiman?"

Her face flushed slightly. "Uh, that's his dog."

Both Brenda's eyebrows went up. "His dog doesn't think you're tough? Why?"

"He sits on people."

"McCallum?"

"The dog!"

"Oh." Brenda frowned at her. "Madeline, you aren't making a bit of sense to me."

"It's not important." She turned to the filing cabinet. "If you'll help me rearrange this mess, I'll treat you to lunch."

"At that new fish and chips place?" came the wheedling reply.

She grinned. "You're on!"

* * *

The first few days were stilted ones, and she had to fight to keep herself from bristling when McCallum sent his barbed remarks in her direction. But unflappable Madeline managed to regain something of her old, somber self, and she reverted to her former status as super secretary. Before long she was a step ahead of him in making appointments, getting letters out, making reservations—for two, usually—for his out-of-town trips. She became his right hand, as she'd become Mr. Richard's, quietly efficient, practically indispensable. And through it all, she maintained her silence and her

temper with pride and dignity—which seemed to drive him to the brink of madness.

“What the hell kind of reply is this?” he demanded late one afternoon as he waved a draft of a letter at her over his desk. “I told you, madam, to inform Mr. Digsby that he could take his offer of a merger and . . . !”

“I am not putting that word in the letter,” she replied calmly, “and if you want to fire me for refusing, go ahead.”

His eyes glittered darkly at her. “Little Miss Prim and Proper,” he mocked. “The unflappable Miss Blainn. My God, how did I ever deserve such a paragon of virtue?”

She didn’t even flinch at the criticism, standing pat. If he wanted to call her names, let him. After what he’d already said, it was water off a duck’s back.

“You’ve got a Rotary Club meeting at twelve-thirty,” she reminded him. “If you’re quite through insulting me, tell me how you’d like the letter to read, please, and I’ll do it again.”

He studied her quietly, smoldering. “I can’t get a rise out of you, can I?”

“I’m here to work for you, not to argue with you, sir,” she replied formally. “Is there anything else?”

“No, damn you!” he shot back.

She turned and walked toward the door.

“Burgundy!”

She stiffened at the use of her nickname, but kept on walking out the door.

* * *

It was one of the longest afternoons she could remember. McCallum didn't come back in after he left for the Rotary meeting, for which she offered up a silent prayer of thanks at quitting time. But thinking he would, and dreading it, wore her out. She was more than ready to go home.

When she drove up under the carport, it was to find another car sitting there—with Cousin Horace sprawled out over the hood.

“Horace, what are you doing?” she laughed.

He slid off the hood and stretched with a grin. “Catching up on my sleep while I waited for you,” he said. “Mind a house-guest for another couple of nights?”

“Heavens no, you're a godsend!”

“Cuz, you'll make my head swell,” he laughed.

She unlocked the door and let them in, pausing to feed Cabbage while Horace took his bags upstairs.

“Did you win the case?” she called up after him.

“I sure did!” he called back. “I got my client a half

million in libel.”

“I’m proud of you!”

“Thanks, Cuz!”

She shook her head, mulling over the pitiful contents of the refrigerator. “Horace, how do you feel about cottage cheese and half a dish of yogurt for supper?”

“What?”

She shrugged. “That’s all I’ve got unless you want to go to the store with me.”

He came bounding down the stairs, straightening his tie. “I’ve got a better idea. How about letting me take you out for a steak?” He lowered his voice in a conspiratorial whisper. “If you’re a good girl, I’ll even buy you a baked potato to go with it.”

“Throw in some sour cream and chives, and you’re on!”

“Okay,” he said reluctantly. “But only because it’s you.”

She smiled at him. “Horace, I like you.”

“I like you, too. Sorry I can’t say the same for your neighbor,” he added, feeling his jaw, which was still a little blue.

“Times have changed since you were here,” she sighed. “He’s not my neighbor anymore, but he’s still my boss—temporarily.”

“Huh?” he said.

“I’ll tell you all about it over supper.”

“Blackmail, is it?” he said warily.

“Now, Horace, you wouldn’t call buying your favorite cousin a steak blackmail would you?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“Could you repeat the question?”

She dragged him out the door.

* * *

They went to a well-known restaurant, where the atmosphere was plush and cozy, and the service was almost too good to believe.

“Are you sure you can afford this place?” she whispered across the table.

He looked insulted. “I told you, I won the case.”

“But it’s been a while since then.”

He laughed. “I eat onions on my steak, remember? How can I spend money if I don’t have girls?”

She looked hurt. “I thought I was a girl.”

Smiling, he laid his lean hand over hers on the table. “You’re my favorite girl, and if we weren’t first cousins, I can’t think of anybody I’d rather have for my girl.”

She smiled back at him. And in the middle of that innocently affectionate tableau, McCallum and his blonde happened to walk past the two cousins on their

way to the table a little farther along the wall.

“Good evening, Miss Blainn,” he said formally.

She looked up and felt her face going white. She tried to ignore the voluptuous blonde at his side, but it wasn’t easy; the woman was giving her a catty smile.

“Good evening, Mr. McCallum,” she replied tightly.

As they passed, she heard the blonde say loudly, “Isn’t that my neighbor—the one you spent so much time with while I was away? Honestly, Cal, I thought you had better taste! And she’s a *child* . . . !”

Madeline’s fingers tightened around her water glass until the knuckles showed white.

“Want me to go belt her for you?” Horace asked with a toothy grin. “I can always plead justifiable mayhem.”

She forced an answering smile to her lips. “You’re better than a tonic. Gosh, I hope I can finish my steak without choking.”

“Rule number one, Madeline—don’t ever let them know they’re getting to you.” He pushed her plate farther toward her. “And if that advice doesn’t work, please remember the rising cost of beef. You may never eat it again.”

That made her laugh. She shook her head as she cut another strip from the perfectly cooked steak. “By the way, remember I was telling you once about my plans

for that hedge next door? Tomorrow morning, first thing, I'm going to start burying mines."

"Good girl! Want to borrow my Sherman tank?"

"With the cost of gas sky high?" she said in mock horror. "Better lend me something that gets better mileage!"

* * *

Somehow she finished her meal, ignoring the dark stares that came her way periodically from the other side of the restaurant.

It was a relief when Horace paid the bill and led her outside into the warm, dark night with the colorful dotting of streetlights.

"What an ordeal that was." She sighed without thinking.

"You never told him about me, did you?" he asked.

"That we were cousins? Why should I?" she grumbled. "I didn't owe him any explanations. I don't owe him *anything*."

He turned toward her as they reached the car. "Little Maddy," he said gently, "hasn't it yet occurred to you that a boss doesn't go around punching other men when he catches them with his secretary?"

She felt the shock all the way to her toes. "But, he didn't . . . he doesn't . . ." she stammered.

“Are you sure?” he persisted.

She stared into the darkness, remembering the words, the anger, the bitterness. “Yes,” she sighed bitterly. “I’m very sure. I can’t explain it to you, but yes, I’m sure.”

Horace was silent for a long time. When they reached the driveway, he parked the little car beside Madeline’s and switched off the engine but didn’t get out.

“Remember what you promised me last time I was here?” he asked suddenly.

“Huh?”

“You know, about your friend Brenda,” he said, jogging her memory. “I’d really like to meet her before I have to go home.”

“Well, I guess it would be okay. How about meeting us for lunch tomorrow?” she asked.

“Fine. I’ll pick you both up at noon, okay?”

“Okay.” She studied him. “You know, I think you just might hit it off with her. She’s a lot like you.”

“I thought you said she was a girl.”

She laughed loudly. “Oh, you idiot!”

She took his arm as they went inside, oblivious to the dark car passing the driveway, slowing as they were silhouetted going into the house together.

CHAPTER 9

There was an ominous atmosphere in the office as she walked in the next morning and put her things in her desk drawer. Brenda, at the next desk, was trying to signal something, but the sudden jerk of McCallum's door stifled it.

"Miss Blainn, come in my office, please," he said in a tone that left no room for argument.

She followed him inside. He slammed the door behind him and walked around his desk, seating himself at it with a leisure that belied the fury in his narrow eyes.

"I want you out of here by next Friday," he said without preamble.

She gaped at him. "But you said . . ." she gasped.

"To hell with what I said." His jaw set angrily. "I will not have the moral fabric of this corporation

disgraced by the behavior of any employee. Is that clear! My God, did you think no one would notice?"

"Notice? Notice what, that I had supper with my...."

"With your lover," he finished the sentence for her, his voice deep and slow and cutting. "If you'd been reasonably discreet, it would be a different matter. But to have him living with you...."

"Living with me?" she interrupted, her eyes widening, flashing fire. "You hypocrite, how do you know what he is? And you're a fine one to talk about morals, you don't have any!"

"Who the hell are you to sit in judgement on me, you little tramp?" he thundered.

She went white. Absolutely white. Her eyes closed momentarily until she could get control of herself again. When she opened them, they were misty with unshed tears and unvented temper.

She clasped her hands in front of her. "I'll have my desk cleaned out by next Friday—or this Friday, if you prefer," she said in a ghostly whisper.

"I can stomach you for another week," he replied coldly. "Now get out of my sight."

With a spine that felt like a T-square, she marched out of his office, through hers, past a startled Brenda, straight into the ladies' room. And she cried and cried,

until the gasping sobs bordered on hysteria. Dimly, she was aware of Brenda's arm around her, of soothing words that made a jumble of sympathy in her mind. Finally, they penetrated, and she dried her eyes and swallowed down the pincushion that seemed to catch in her throat.

"How much longer are you going to take that kind of abuse?" Brenda asked sadly.

"For exactly one more week and one more day," she replied. "After which you can have the pleasure of McCallum's company at the office full time until some other poor soul replaces me."

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry, I tried to warn you about the temper he was in."

"Thanks anyway." She dabbed at her swollen eyes. "Oh, by the way, I've got a surprise for you for lunch."

"You have? What is it, an apple pie?"

"A man."

Brenda's eyes widened. "A man. For me?"

"Cousin Horace," she said with a wry smile. "He's wanted to meet you for a long time. Do you mind?"

"Who, me?" Her mouth fell open. "He really did? What does he look like, what is he like?"

"He's tall and thin and full of fun. He's also a very successful lawyer, but you knew that, didn't you?"

"Well . . . I did talk to him a time or two on the

phone when you weren't here." She smiled. "He sounded nice."

"He is nice. I think you'll like him."

Brenda hugged her. "You okay now?"

She nodded. "Let's get back to work."

* * *

McCallum came out of his lair long enough to ask for a file, and she gave it to him without comment. If he noticed her swollen eyes or the hollow look about them, he didn't say a word.

It took forever for twelve o'clock to come, but it finally did, and when Horace walked in the door in his stylish tan suit, she wanted to run to him. But she caught Brenda by the hand, and led her over, not noticing that Mr. McCallum's door had opened.

"Brenda, I'd like you to meet my cousin, Horace Blainn. He's Uncle Fred and Aunt Johnnie's son. You've heard me talk about them enough, I know." She laughed softly. "Horace, this is Brenda Lyle, the best friend I have in the world."

Horace shook her hand with a toothy grin. "Hello, best friend, do you believe in long engagements?" he asked.

"The shorter the better," Brenda shot right back. "Why, are we getting married right away?"

“Not before lunch,” he returned. “But, maybe by dinner. . . .”

“Miss Blainn.”

The voice was deep and husky and had a note in it that was unlike anything Madeline had ever heard before. She turned to find Mr. McCallum coming out of his office, his face like frozen marble, his eyes strange and haunted.

“Yes, sir?” she asked quietly, unflinching.

“I’d like to dictate one last letter before you leave for lunch,” he said.

She turned a smile on Horace and Brenda. “You two go ahead. I’ll meet you at Tom’s as soon as I can.”

“Suits me,” Horace said, with a wink at Brenda.

“Hello, Mr. McCallum,” he added in a voice like ice as he met the older man’s eyes.

McCallum only nodded, his gaze whipping back to Madeline.

“We won’t elope until you get there,” Brenda called over her shoulder as they walked out and closed the door behind them, leaving Madeline alone with the big, quiet man.

“He’s your cousin,” he said, making a statement out of what sounded like a question.

“My first cousin,” she replied dully.

His eyes searched her face like a detective looking

for an elusive clue. “Why in God’s name didn’t you tell me that?” he asked softly. “Why did you let me think....”

“I owe you nothing!” she choked in a softly furious tone, her eyes warring with his. “*Nothing*, Mr. McCallum! If you like to think that I’m like that blonde you had with you last night, go ahead. I don’t care what you think, what you do, where you go, or what happens to you. I don’t care, do you hear me? After next Friday, I don’t ever want to see you again!”

His eyes narrowed, this time as if in pain. “I hurt you very badly, didn’t I, little girl?” he asked gently.

That soft note in his voice made her want to cry. “You flatter yourself,” she replied tightly.

He searched her eyes deeply, his own eyes solemn, intense. “I know what it is to hurt,” he told her. “I haven’t stopped since the day they buried my son.”

Her eyes fell. “I’m sorry. But taking it out on me won’t bring him back.”

“Is that what you think I was doing?” He laughed shortly. “It’s just as well. Caring carries a high price, Burgundy, I don’t intend ever paying it again. Go eat your lunch.”

She glanced toward his broad back as he stared out the window. “The letter. . . .”

“There wasn’t one.” He drew in a deep, bitter

breath. "I wanted to apologize for making you cry this morning. I don't know how." He brushed his hair back from his brow. "I'm through crucifying you," he added, self-contempt lacing his words. "From now on, you're my secretary. I won't treat you any other way."

She opened the door quietly and went out.

* * *

Things were subtly different after that. He treated her much as Mr. Richards had, as a valuable ally, a functioning piece of office equipment. There were no more harsh insults, no more barbed offhand remarks. He was polite, and courteous, and not much more.

"You look like death walking," Brenda remarked one morning just before the weekend. "Are you going to make it the rest of the day?"

"I'm tough," she reminded Brenda. "And unflappable. Remember?"

The other girl studied her, the dark shadows under her eyes, the dangerously slender figure, the sadness in her eyes. "You're so very thin," she smiled wanly. "Maddy, can't I help?"

"What do you have in mind, fattening me up on cream cakes?" she teased as she went to answer the insistent phone.

The call was from a very irate caller who wanted to

know, first, why the hell McCallum Corporation called itself a construction company. He went on to ask a lot more irate questions that questioned everything from the materials the company used to McCallum's parentage, and hung up before she could get out a reply.

From that moment on, everything seemed to go backwards. There was a venomous fight between two of the girls in the typing pool that she had to break up. The flight she'd scheduled McCallum for on his New York trip was cancelled, and she had to reschedule it, which seemed to take forever. And then the accounting department manager called and wanted to know, in no uncertain terms, why their budget had been cut. As she tried to explain, the manager blew up and slammed the receiver in her face.

That was when McCallum chose to call her in for dictation—and a lecture.

She leaned back against the door, knowing by the look on his face that she'd done something wrong.

"Jackson tells me he's booked at the Manitou Arms, and I'm staying at some godforsaken camp called Ark's Rest at that Canadian hunting preserve," he told her with a glare. "What the hell have you done?"

He lips started trembling, and she pressed them together to stop it. But the tears wouldn't be stopped, they rolled down her cheeks in giant droplets, all the

more pathetic for their very silence.

His eyes narrowed. "Burgundy," he whispered softly. He stepped away from the desk and held out his arms. "Come here, honey."

Suddenly, he wasn't Mr. McCallum any more. He was Cal, and the weeks rolled back, and he spelled all she knew of security. Without thinking, she ran right into those hard, uncompromising arms and felt them swallow her up.

He rocked her gently, holding her, smoothing her long hair, whispering words she didn't half hear against her temple.

A handkerchief was pressed into one of the small hands clenched against his broad chest, and she wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

"I'm sorry, it was just one more thing, and I've been cussed out three times already, and . . ." she whimpered.

His lips brushed her forehead. "Hush, now," he murmured. "Hush, sweet."

She took a deep, shaky breath, and looked up at him. His eyes were warm and dark gray, and there was something in them that she couldn't look away from.

His big hand came up to rest against her cheek. It was warm and rough and vaguely caressing. "If you keep looking at me like that," he said in a deep, sensuous whisper, "something very unbusinesslike is

going to happen between us.”

She flushed and quickly drew away from him, keeping her eyes lowered. “Excuse me,” she said huskily. “A-about those reservations, Ark’s Rest is just across the street from the other hotel, and it was the best I could do, sir.”

He muttered something that sounded like a suppressed curse and turned away. “All right, never mind. Take a letter.”

* * *

The house was empty without Horace. He’d gone home two days ago, singing Brenda’s praises to the skies. He promised to come back soon with such enthusiasm that Madeline began to wonder just how big an impression Brenda had made. That young lady wouldn’t even talk about her two dates with the up-and-coming young lawyer, which meant, Madeline thought, that something was definitely going on.

The solitude was endless, irritating. She wouldn’t go into the front yard because that blonde octopus was still next door, lazing away in her very public swimming pool in a bikini that left everything hanging out. Husbands up and down the block were mowing their lawns that Saturday morning with a fervor that was simply unnatural. And they weren’t looking where they

were going, either, Madeline thought wickedly.

She fed Cabbage and left her inside, strolling aimlessly down to the stream behind the house. She sat there for a long time, watching the water ripple, feeling the first peace she'd known in days. She lay back and closed her eyes, drinking in the shade and the scattered sounds of wind whispering against green leaves. And before long, they began to fade in and out and, finally disappear.

Something woke her. A sound. A voice. She opened her eyes dazedly and saw an illusion sitting quietly just above her on the bank, his eyes dark at the distance watching her.

"Cal!" she whispered sleepily.

A glimmer of amusement danced in his eyes for an instant. "It's been a long time since you called me that," he remarked.

Self-consciously, she dragged herself into a sitting position with a yawn. "How long have you been here?"

"Just a few minutes. You looked like you could use the rest, so I let you sleep," he told her.

"Oh." She glanced at him, toying with a twig to keep her hands busy. "Is something wrong at the office?"

He shook his head, his eyes going to the stream. "Bess had to change. I wanted to see if the scenery had

changed,” he said with brutal frankness.

“Won’t she miss you?” she asked as coolly as she could.

He turned those slate gray eyes on her relentlessly. “She’d miss my money like hell.”

She averted her face. “Definitely your kind of woman,” she replied.

“Definitely,” he agreed. “No responsibilities, no ties. Just what I want, when I want it, however the hell I want it.”

She fought a blush and lost. “How nice.”

He sighed harshly. “Just occasionally, a man saturated with champagne likes the taste of beer.”

“If you’re tired of prostitutes, why not do penance by taking out a nun?” she asked.

“I did. Remember?” he asked with a taunting smile.

“I’d rather forget.” She stood up. “I’ve got some laundry to do,” she said, turning away.

His big hands caught her waist, drawing her gently back until she could feel the hardness of his massive chest against her shoulder blades.

His cheek nuzzled her temple. “Would you really rather forget?” he whispered deeply, moving his hands gently up her side. “I can still make you tremble, little girl; I can feel your pulse jump every time I touch you.”

She caught his hands and stilled them. “Don’t make

fun of me,” she pleaded shakily.

His fingers tightened painfully. “I’m not making fun of you. Burgundy, I . . .”

“Oh, there you are, Cal,” came a husky, irritated female voice from behind them. The blonde glared at Madeline. “Robbing the cradles again?” she asked McCallum.

He turned, and what the blonde saw in his eyes made her flinch. “Get back to the house and wait for me,” he told her.

“But, Cal . . .” she pouted.

“Now.” The single word had a contempt that brought a flush to the blonde’s cheeks, but she went, quickly.

Madeline folded her arms across her chest. “Don’t let me keep you,” she murmured.

“I want to talk to you.”

She shrugged. “What is there to say that hasn’t already been said?”

He drew a deep breath. “I want things the way they were between us. I won’t make any demands on you, in any way. But I want this wall to come down. I don’t want to find myself a world away from you again.”

“You’re Mr. McCallum,” she said quietly, meeting his eyes.

“I’m a man.”

She swallowed. "I . . . I don't know"

"We can try, damn it. Is that too much to ask?" he growled.

She looked down at her sandals. "Is it wise to try to go back?"

"I don't care," he said flatly. "I hate like hell to watch television alone, and I haven't flown since that day I told you the truth."

"It couldn't be for lack of offers to keep you company," she reminded him.

"I can't spend my life in bed," he said with brutal frankness, ignoring her flaming blush. "There are other things."

She broke the twig in her hands in half. "Just friends?" she emphasized.

Something came and went in his eyes, but he nodded. "Just that."

"All right."

"Pax?" he asked with a smile.

She answered it. "Pax."

* * *

The next morning she was awakened by a flurry of activity next door. A moving van was in the driveway, the blonde was cursing as she got into her red Jaguar, and minutes later everything was quiet. Madeline shook

her head in confusion. A moving van on Sunday? She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down dazedly at the breakfast bar, her blue caftan hanging limply around her slender body.

There was a loud knock at the door a few minutes later, and she went to answer it with a puzzled frown.

“You might offer me a cup of coffee,” Cal said quietly, leaning against the carport wall in the casual clothes she’d first seen him in—dark trousers and a white knit shirt with a frayed collar.

“What are you doing here?” she burst out, trying to hide a smile as he brushed past her and went to the cabinet to search for a cup.

“Drinking coffee, if I could find a cup,” he muttered, finally dragging out a cracked mug. He held it up. “My God, poverty row,”

“I don’t use my good china for breakfast,” she replied, aghast. “What are you doing here?” she repeated.

He poured himself a cup of the thick black liquid and dragged out a stool to seat himself comfortably at the bar beside her. “I’m paying my first neighborly visit,” he said casually. “No toast?”

“Honestly!” She got up and took out two slices of bread, popping them into the toaster. “Neighborly?” she repeated, as if the words just began to make sense.

“I traded with Bess. I hate apartments,” he added.

“And Suleiman . . . ?” she asked.

He smiled. “Sprawled on the floor in front of the couch, watching television. It’s one of his peculiarities.”

She stared into her cup, trying not to let her happiness show. “How does Bess like the apartment?”

He reached out a hand and tilted her head up to his. “I don’t know, and I don’t care. She’s on her own now.” His thumb brushed her lips slowly, gently. “It was over between us long ago, Burgundy. She was window dressing. Something decorative to keep my ghosts quiet.”

“Do they haunt you, Cal?” she asked softly.

His eyes were unguarded for once, and she read the deep, quiet pain in them. “They haunt me. I was flying the plane.”

“Oh, Cal,” she whispered, her face contorted with the pain she felt for him. “Oh, Cal, I’m so sorry!”

He drew a heavy breath and wrapped both hands around his mug.

“You knew about Jen, I told you. But you don’t know about Teddy. I haven’t been able to talk about him, not since it happened.” His eyes closed for a moment. “He was five years old, and if I lived for anything, I lived for that little boy. What I didn’t feel for Jen, I felt for him. If he’d asked for the sun, I’d have

gotten it for him, somehow. He wanted to go to the beach. There were storm warnings out, but I'd logged a lot of flying time, and he begged." He gripped the cup harder. "Jen grumbled about it. She didn't want to go, she had . . . other plans. But he wouldn't go without her, so I loaded them into the plane and we took off. We hadn't been in the air fifteen minutes when one of the engines was hit by lightning and went out. I did my damndest to land that plane, but we were over a forest and I couldn't keep her aloft. It took a whole day for the search party to get to the plane, and then they had to do it with pack mules, it was such an isolated spot. Jen was finished when we came down. But my boy . . . it took three hours, and my leg was broken. I couldn't move," he ended on a whisper. "I had to watch it. . . ."

Without a word she got up and put her arms around him, holding him, rocking him back against her, her head resting against his.

"Life goes on," she whispered gently. "It has to."

He caught her arms where they were locked around his chest and pulled her even closer, moving his head against hers. "Didn't I tell you that once?" he asked huskily.

"Yes," she smiled. "I went on living, too. Although," she added, "you didn't make it very easy for me."

"Of course I didn't," he growled. "I thought you'd

given that balding adolescent what you wouldn't give me, and I wanted to kill both of you."

"I—I thought we were just friends," she murmured.

He drew her around to sit on the stool beside him, holding her by the arms gently while he searched her face from an unnerving proximity.

"Do you remember that last night we spent at the Col-mans'?" he asked softly. "Do you remember the way we kissed in the hallway that night—both of us so damned hungry, we could hardly bear to let go of each other? Was that friendship, Burgundy?" he asked quietly, holding her eyes.

Her lips trembled as she met that heady gaze. "It . . . it was just . . . just physical attraction," she whispered.

His big hands cupped her face, his eyes searched hers with a maddening intensity.

"Is this . . . physical alone?" he whispered, and bending forward, fitted his mouth to hers with a practiced leisure that made her pulse do somersaults in her chest. She moaned softly, trying to pull away, and he let her.

His eyes bored into hers. "That made you tremble all the way to your soul," he said gently. "I felt it."

"It . . . it didn't mean . . ." she faltered, still feeling the warm pressure of his lips.

“It’s enough for a start.” He finished his coffee and stood up. “Have dinner with me tomorrow night.”

“At . . . at home?” she asked helplessly.

He studied her trembling mouth. “I don’t think that’s safe, honey, do you?” he asked with a wicked smile.

She blushed. “Don’t think I’m afraid . . . ”

He leaned down, brushing her mouth with his, hovering just above it as her head went back, her lips parting softly, unconsciously inviting.

“Do you still think it’s safe?” he murmured against her lips.

“Cal . . . ” she whispered mindlessly.

“Stand up,” he whispered back, bringing her gently up against his hard body, wrapping her against him with a slow, relentless pressure. “Now kiss me,” he whispered at her lips. “Hard and slow, kiss me, Madeline.”

The sound of her name on his lips took the rest of her unvoiced protests right out of her mind. Unthinking, uncaring, she went on tiptoe and pressed her lips hard against his, using what skill he’d taught her, lifting her arms around his neck to draw him even closer.

He drew back even as she felt the faint tremor run the length of his body. His eyes burned as they looked down into hers, dark with emotion, but strangely tender.

“Now you tell me,” he whispered. “Is it safe to spend an evening alone with me, like this?”

Robbed even of speech, she shook her head, dazed, her eyes locked on the hard curve of his mouth as if it hypnotized her.

“Do you want it again?” he taunted softly, his arms contracting around her slender body.

Embarrassed, she pressed against his chest, and he laughed softly.

His mouth pressed lightly at her forehead, and he let her go. “I’ll pick you up at seven. And wear a dress,” he added, winking as he went out the door.

She went to bed early, puzzled, confused. But she didn’t sleep.

The next day at the office the difference in Madeline brought curious stares from Brenda and the other girls. She was happy for the first time in weeks, and she seemed to bloom like a rose.

Even McCallum noticed. He called her to dictate a letter and stopped right in the middle of a sentence to study her.

“My God, you’re beautiful,” he said softly, his eyes sketching her face.

She blushed. “Thank you.”

“God knows, it’s not flattery. For a long time, you’ve walked around here like a little ghost. Did I do

that to you?" he asked, and the pain was in his eyes.

She shook her head.

"Don't lie, Madeline. I hurt you. I did it deliberately," he added softly. "God knows I'd give anything to take back what I said."

She studied the pad in her lap. "It's over now. We're friends again."

"Friends?" he mused.

She met the look in his eyes and blushed furiously.

He leaned back in his chair, big and masculine and vibrant, the gray of his suit darkening the gray of his eyes. And he smiled.

"Let's finish up. We've got a lot of places to go."

CHAPTER 10

She was as nervous as a teenaged girl on her first real date. Three times she changed her dress, finally settling for a white chiffon cloud of feminine appeal. She experimented with hairstyles for an hour, too, before she gave up and decided to leave her hair loose. All she could think about was that look in Cal's shimmering eyes today; it held the promise of something wild and dangerous.

She jumped when she heard the knock at the door, and ran to answer it. Cal was there in black evening clothes, unbearably handsome, smelling of expensive cologne. He was so good-looking that she couldn't tear her eyes away.

"I like you in white," he said quietly, his eyes sweeping over her gently.

"There was a time when you thought it should be

scarlet,” she laughed.

He pressed a long finger against her red mouth. “Don’t you know yet,” he asked in a silvery whisper, “that I’m jealous as hell of you? That I’d break a man in half for touching you if you didn’t want him to?”

She gaped at him, the words reaching deep inside to clutch at her heart and shake it. “You were jealous . . . of Horace?”

“Murderously,” he said with a quiet smile. “We’ll talk about it later. Right now,” he added, glancing at his watch, “we’ve got just thirty minutes to get to Chez Pierre before they give our table to someone else. Ready?”

She nodded, robbed of speech by an admission that made her head swim.

* * *

It was a cozy little nightclub downtown with soft lights, a live band, and what passed for a dance floor. They were seated at a secluded table for two with no one close by, and Cal’s eyes never left hers when they sat down.

“Have I told you,” he said softly, “how very lovely you are, Miss Blainn?”

She smiled at him, her eyes bright with emotion. “I’m very glad you think so, Mr. McCallum.”

He caught her hand where it lay on the table and lifted the palm to his mouth, making little jolts of electricity travel all the way down her spine.

The arrival of the waiter spared her an answer to the devilish look Cal was giving her. He ordered for both of them.

“Steak and lobster both?” she exclaimed. “But, Cal . . .”

“You’re going to need,” he said very quietly, “every ounce of strength you’ve got to fight me off later.”

That look in his narrow eyes made her pulse accelerate. “What if I can’t?” she whispered without thinking.

His hand caught hers, swallowing it, crushing it. “Dance with me,” he said in a taut voice.

He drew her onto the dance floor where several other couples were wound around each other shuffling their feet to the lazy, seductive music of the band.

She lifted her hand to place it in his, but he caught both of them and lifted them up around his neck, pulling her body wholly against his.

“Like this, Madeline,” he murmured, looking down into her eyes with a gaze that made her knees go limp. “Close and warm against me,” he whispered, his hands moving up to the edge of her dress which left her shoulder blades bare.

“What about the food?” she whispered shakily.

“All I want is you,” he whispered back.

“Cal . . . !”

His face moved down so that his cheek rested against hers, his breath warm at her ear, his arms all but crushing her.

“Don’t talk,” he murmured. “Don’t talk, honey, just let me hold you. God, it’s been such a long time . . . !”

Her eyes closed. She relaxed and let the music and the magic wash over her like a warm wave of feeling, submerging her, drowning her in sensation.

“You’re trembling,” he whispered.

Her arms tightened around his neck. “I know, and I don’t care,” she managed in a husky whisper. “Oh, Cal, I missed you, I missed you . . . I thought you hated me, and I couldn’t bear it!”

“I hated what I thought you’d done, not you,” he replied. “I couldn’t hate you. I wouldn’t know how to begin.” His arms relaxed just a little so that he could raise his head and Look down at her. “I wanted to kill your cousin. I’ve never felt anything like that—never! Just thinking that he’d touched you . . . ” He drew a deep, harsh breath. “You don’t know the hell I went through. I wanted to hurt you for that, but hurting you only made it worse for me.”

Involuntarily, her hand came down to his cheek, her

fingers touched his face, his stubborn chin, the hard curve of his mouth.

“You . . . you said once that caring had a high price tag,” she whispered, “that you never wanted to pay it again. It was like that with me, too. I thought I loved Phillip more than my own life. I thought . . . I thought I couldn’t ever give anything of myself to a man again.”

He pressed her fingers to his lips and kissed them gently. “And now?” he asked softly, meeting her melting gaze.

She smiled tremulously. “If you asked for everything I could give, I’d only ask when,” she replied tearfully. “I’m sorry you’re rich and women chase you and you hate getting involved with people and you . . . you have to carry a great brute of a watchdog around with you like a black wart!” Her voice broke in a sob. “But I love you Cal. I love you. . . .”

His mouth cut her off, hard and hungry and incredibly savage, not caring where they were and how many people were watching. He kissed her as if they were both about to go down on a sinking ship. And when he tore his mouth away, she was crying.

He drew a great trembling breath and led her back to their table, where plates of food and cups of steaming coffee were waiting.

He stared at her across the table, looking as if he’d

been hit in the head with a hammer. His eyes were narrow, glittering under the scowl on his black brows.

“How long, honey?” he asked softly.

Her mouth trembled. She dabbed at her eyes with her napkin, wishing that she could sink down through the floor or get up and run. How could she have said such a thing to him of all people?

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her eyes downcast, agony in every line of her face as she picked up her fork. “Please, could we forget that. . . .”

“Burgundy.”

He made her name a caress, and she looked up to see soft fires burning in those dark gray eyes as they met hers.

“Finish your dinner,” he said softly. “Then we’ll go home.”

She nodded. Her eyes closed momentarily as she began to automatically lift bits of lobster into her mouth. Pity, she thought, he’ll offer me pity and pat me on the head, and that’ll be the end of it. We won’t even be friends anymore. She swallowed down a lump the size of a baseball and fought more tears. It wouldn’t do to cry, not now. So she concentrated on her meal, which had the taste of cardboard to her numb senses. She finished the very fine old wine in her glass with a gulp and sat quietly waiting for him to pay the check so they

could leave.

There was a silence in the car so pronounced as to be almost tangible. She sat rigidly, keeping her eyes on the lights of businesses and street lamps, wishing it were already over, wishing she didn't have to face him over his desk ever again and remember. . . .

They were pulling into her driveway. He stopped the car just behind her little economy vehicle, and she grabbed the door handle as if it were a lifeline.

"Thanks for a lovely evening; I won't keep you," she said, the words stumbling all over one another as she opened the door and got out.

She closed it behind her and ran to the back door of the house, fumbling with her key, her mind vaguely registering that he'd cut the engine and that there were heavy footsteps behind her.

Two big, warm arms went around her from behind before she could turn the doorknob. He drew her gently back against his hard muscled body and rocked her, his cheek against her temple.

"No coffee?" he murmured with amusement in his deep voice.

"Do . . . do you want a cup?" she managed shakily.

His arms tightened. "We both know what I want. Let's go inside, Burgundy. I don't think I can wait any longer. I'm not getting any younger running you to

ground.”

With a quiet sigh, she opened the door and went in, with the big man right behind her. So it was to be now, and she was afraid. Would loving be enough, she wondered, to compensate for the back seat she'd be relegated to in his busy life?

He turned her gently, his eyes dwelling on the sad, white little face under its halo of auburn hair.

His big hands cupped her cheeks. They were warm, patient hands that were oddly comforting. “I’d be very gentle with you, don’t you know that?” he whispered deeply.

Chewing on her lower lip, she nodded, feeling the fear as if it were crawling on her skin.

He smiled, and it was in his eyes, his face, in the hard lines that relaxed as he looked at her.

“This was inevitable between us, from the first,” he told her. “You knew that, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she replied, her hands resting on the warmth of his chest. “I knew it.”

His lips brushed her forehead. “When?” he asked.

She took a deep breath. “Whenever . . . you want to,” she said in a squeaky voice.

“It takes two days to get a license . . . or three,” he murmured thoughtfully. “But by Friday. . . .”

She gaped at him. “A license? A . . . marriage

license?” she gasped.

Both dark eyebrows went up. “Woman, in my own way, I’m every bit as old-fashioned as you are,” he said quietly. “I’m not taking you into my bed without a ceremony.”

Tears brightened her eyes. “I thought . . . !”

He bent and kissed the tears away tenderly. “I know what you thought; God knows where you get the idea that I had hot and cold running women in every room of my house. I don’t want you for a night. I want you, every day, for the rest of my life.” His hands tightened on her face. “I want children with you. I want to take you on trips with me, and watch sunsets with you when we’re both too old to gallop all over creation . . . oh, God, woman, I’m trying to tell you that I love you, but maybe this is a better way. . . .”

He lifted her up against him and found her mouth, cherished it with a tenderness and a fierce passion that made her cling, made her respond until the world faded around her and there was only Cal, always Cal, forever Cal.

He drew away finally, breathless and dark eyed, his arms trembling almost imperceptibly as he reluctantly put her from him. “Make some coffee,” he said.

She drew a shaky breath and smiled up at him. “Anything you say, Mr. McCallum. I baked an apple

pie this morning . . . ?”

“Need you ask?” He grinned.

She dodged Cabbage and started the coffee, glancing at Cal over her shoulder as he perched himself on a stool.

“Cal, what about Cabbage and Suleiman?” she asked with concern in her voice.

“They’ll learn to love each other,” he assured her, reaching down to pet Cabbage. “Will you move in with me?”

She smiled. “I’d like that. Then Cousin Horace can have this house after all.” She gazed at him with everything she felt in her eyes. “Cal, are you sure?” she asked softly.

He returned the smile with a promise of loving in his eyes that made her heart leap. “What do you think?” he asked deeply.

Blushing, she turned to slice the apple pie. “I think living with you is going to be the biggest adventure of all.”

He came up behind her and pulled her into his arms. “You’d better believe it, lady.” And he bent to kiss her lazily, slowly, as the coffee began to perk.

On the floor, Cabbage took one look at the humans and curled up under the breakfast bar to sleep.

* * * * *

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SHE'D BOUGHT PRESENTS online for her father and Edna and Blair. She was careful to get Blair something impersonal. She didn't want his wife to think she was chasing him or anything. She picked out a tie tac, a *fleur de lis* made of solid gold. She couldn't understand why she'd chosen such a thing. He had Greek ancestry, as far as she knew, not French. It had been an impulse.

Her father had gone to answer the phone, a call from a business associate who wanted to wish him happy holidays, leaving Blair and Niki alone in the living room by the tree. She felt like an idiot for making the purchase.

Now Blair was opening the gift, and she ground her teeth together when he took the lid off the box and stared at it with wide, stunned eyes.

"I'm sorry," she began self-consciously. "The sales slip is in there," she added. "You can exchange it if..."

He looked at her. His expression stopped her tirade midsentence. "My mother was French," he said quietly. "How did you know?"

She faltered. She couldn't manage words. "I didn't.

It was an impulse.”

His big fingers smoothed over the tie tac. “In fact, I had one just like it that she bought me when I graduated from college.” He swallowed. Hard. “Thanks.”

“You’re very welcome.”

His dark eyes pinned hers. “Open yours now.”

She fumbled with the small box he’d had hidden in his suitcase until this morning. She tore off the ribbons and opened it. Inside was the most beautiful brooch she’d ever seen. It was a golden orchid on an ivory background. The orchid was purple with a yellow center, made of delicate amethyst and topaz and gold.

She looked at him with wide, soft eyes. “It’s so beautiful...”

He smiled with real affection. “It reminded me of you, when I saw it in the jewelry store,” he lied, because he’d had it commissioned by a noted jewelry craftsman, just for her. “Little hothouse orchid,” he teased.

She flushed. She took the delicate brooch out of its box and pinned it to the bodice of her black velvet dress. “I’ve never had anything so lovely,” she faltered. “Thank you.”

He stood up and drew her close to him. “Thank you, Niki.” He bent and started to brush her mouth with his, but forced himself to deflect the kiss to her

soft cheek. “Merry Christmas.”

She felt the embrace to the nails of her toes. He smelled of expensive cologne and soap, and the feel of that powerful body so close to hers made her vibrate inside. She was flustered by the contact, and uneasy because he was married.

She laughed, moving away. “I’ll wear it to church every Sunday,” she promised without really looking at him.

He cleared his throat. The contact had affected him, too. “I’ll wear mine to board meetings, for a lucky charm,” he teased gently. “To ward off hostile takeovers.”

“I promise it will do the job,” she replied, and grinned.

Her father came back to the living room, and the sudden, tense silence was broken. Conversation turned to politics and the weather, and Niki joined in with forced cheerfulness.

But she couldn’t stop touching the orchid brooch she’d pinned to her dress.

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TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

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